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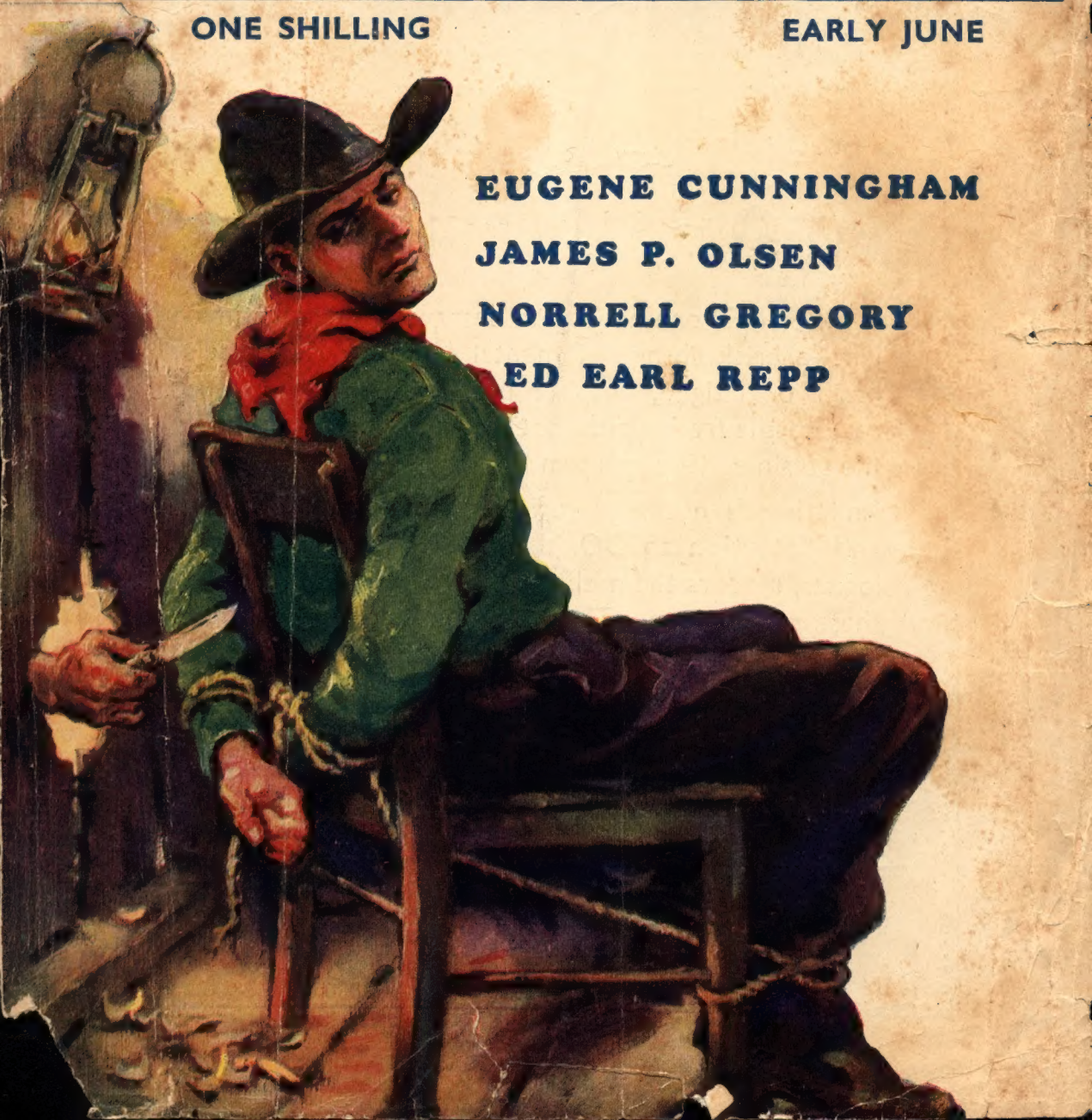

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THE BUFFALO BUSINESS

By JOHN CORCORAN

Two men fork the straight backs of their horses. One has hair that flows down around his shoulders, drooping mustaches, and a ragged Van Dyke beard. His eye gleams darkly as he cradles a long rifle in the crook of his arm. His name is Will Cody. The other is Billy Comstock, chief of scouts at Fort Wallace in the western territories.

Twenty miles back east is Sheridan, Kansas. This is the range of the greatest buffalo herds in America.

The men ride forward, side by side, followed by other men and women on horseback. They are hunting buffalo. They are jousting for the buffalo hunting championship of the world.

A herd is sighted. The referee shouts the start. Spurs to horses, they leap forward. Cody's horse is Brigham, a trained buffalo pony. He circles away. Cody's gun flashes to his shoulder and three shots sink into huge, shaggy shoulders. Cody is killing the leaders of his part of the herd. Comstock is riding their tails, killing the laggards.

Their guns grow hot and the ground is splashed with red. Dead animals lie in pools of blood. Finally, the last animal is down. Score, Comstock, 23; Cody, 38. Twice more that day they find herds and the feud continues. Cody winning every time. His last animal is a raging brute. His pony turns it toward the crowd. Charging head down, with flaming eyes and dilated nostrils, it speeds straight toward the spectators. Ladies scream and men lift guns. Cody spurs Brigham alongside, lifting his rifle. His ball drives down through the hump. The animal falls dead three feet from the first spectator.

It was a champion's exhibition. They named him Buffalo Bill!

Cody was under contract then to the Kansas-Pacific Railway to furnish food for its construction gang. He had to kill 12 buffalo a day, and supervise their skinning and transportation. His salary was $500 a month. During the eighteen months he served, he killed 4,280 buffalo.

The buffalo hunter was the aristocrat of the early Western plains. He made money rapidly. A bull hide brought $2.00. A cow or calf hide, $1.75. Tongues salted away brought "side" money and the mop of hair over the beast's eyes was worth 75 cents a pound.

But as settlers spread Westward and the Indians retreated, it became a free-for-all circus, a degrading slaughter. Everyone killed buffalo and the market was glutted. A man was lucky to get 75 cents for a Grade A skin.

The Kansas-Pacific Railway ran buffalo hunt excursions, specials out of Chicago, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Coaches bristled with firearms and the animals were killed from car-windows. Tongues and steaks were cut away and the rest left to coyotes.

The great herd divided then, split by the rail line. Half went north and half went south toward the Panhandle. But the hunters multiplied everywhere. There was no escape. One man killed 88 in an hour. Not to be outdone, another killed 107. A third hung up a record of 112 in forty-five minutes.

Over a million buffalo died each year. And the prairies that had teemed with wild life became stinking abattoirs sprinkled with bleaching bones and rotting carcasses, until they were all gone.

Now you can see a stuffed buffalo in the Museum of Natural History in New York. Or you can go to a government park out West and look at a dozen or so lively survivors. But the buffalo business is dead.

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THE

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THE COLLECTING MANIA

JUST as humans of all races love jewelry, there are several kinds of animals and birds that are also fond of bright ornaments. They cannot wear them, of course, but they do collect them apparently just for the pleasure they obtain from the oddly shaped or brightly coloured objects that they keep in their treasure troves. The pack rat of the Rocky Mountains is perhaps the most famous collector of them all and unlike the other animals and birds with the same hobby, this creature believes in a fair trade and tradition says always leaves something in place of what he carries away. Sometimes it is only a few smooth pebbles or maybe some other object from his hoarded treasures. Prospectors and trappers know the creature's habits quite well and when any small object is missed, it can often be recovered by searching through the collection at some pack rat's home nearby.

John H. Spicer tells us that South America too has its collector, the viscacha, a small animal found in the Argentine pampas where companies of twenty to fifty of them live in underground villages. They are famous for the terrific growling noises they can produce from their underground tunnels when any intruder is prowling around their colony. The village museum is placed on top of the mound of excavated earth where they accumulate a remarkable collection of odds and ends that have happened to take their fancy. There will be bones, nuts, shells, seeds and eggs gathered from the pampas nearby. Any article lost by a passing rider is also carried home so that the collection often contains such things as watches, whips, spurs, buttons and so on.

Among the feathered folks, the Bower Bird of Australia seems to be the greatest lover of beauty. It gets its name from its habit of building a gallery or bower in the tall grass which it decorates with shells, feathers or other glittering objects that it finds. Blossoms are also used to beautify the bower and it is said that when the blossoms wither, the bird replaces them with fresh ones.

The most persistent feathered collectors are the crows and magpies, especially those of Europe. The common American crow is also a collector and gathers up any odd articles that attract his attention such as bright pebbles and bits of glass and crockery. These are carried away and hidden in some spot known only to the crow itself. The British crows are also collectors who will carry off anything bright that catches their eye. The magpies are perhaps the worst of all and many an article of jewelry has vanished after being left where one of these birds could get at it. Many times this has caused innocent people to be suspected of theft. Such situations have been used more than once in stories and plays where the innocent person did not have their name cleared until the missing valuable was discovered in the nest of the guilty magpie.

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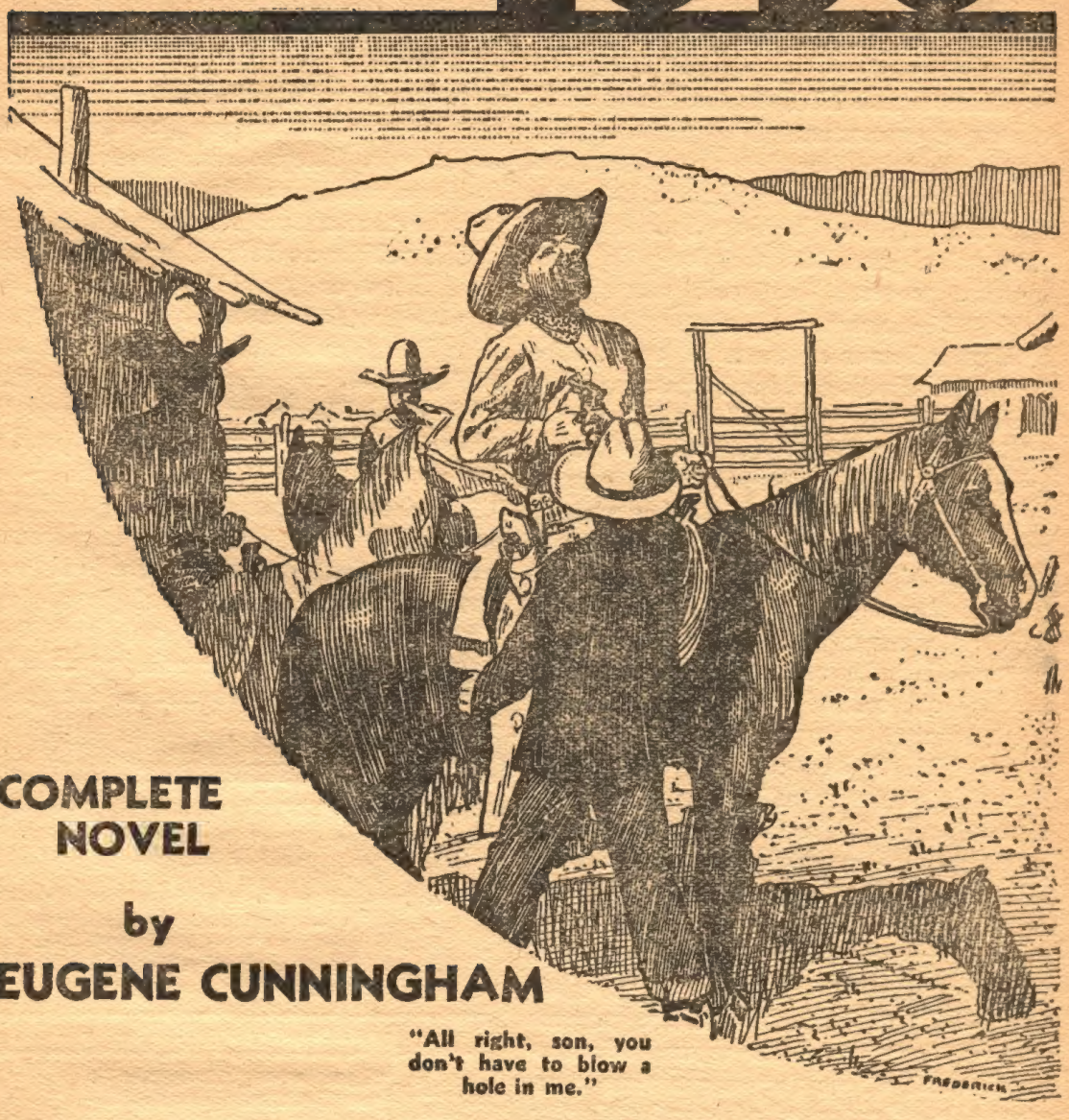


COMPLETE NOVEL

by

EUGENE CUNNINGHAM

"All right, son, you don't have to blow a hole in me."

Lon Cameron came up Toro's main street looking right and left in search of Clint Bynum. But the acting sheriff was nowhere in sight and that, Lon thought, was strange.

"Funny he didn't meet me over at the Junction," he told himself. "And nobody at all left in the sheriff's office . . ."

Clint's telegram had been both short and surprising:

> Your uncle Earl disappeared out of Toro. Am afraid he has been murdered. Better come home quick. Plenty grief on U Bar lately. You ought to be here.

Earl Cameron disappearing seemed jolt enough to Lon. He hadn't heard a word from the old wolf in over two years; hadn't expected to hear from him. But that the big U Bar was having what Clint Bynum called "plenty grief" was amazing. The U Bar and the Hourglass outfits had always just about run Toro County. And Earl Cameron and Jube Race together ought to be able to handle anything that might come up.

A slender blond girl was standing in the doorway of the Toro Mercantile Company. She was a stranger to Lon, but he

LAW

When That Sinister Hand Set The Two Biggest Outfits In Toro County At Each Other's Throats, It Took More Than Guns To Prove That "Once A Cameron Always A Cameron"

was too much occupied with his problems to stand on formalities. He simply touched his hat to her and stopped:

"Excuse me. I'm hunting for Sheriff Clint Bynum. He ought to be in his office but he's not. I—"

She turned a little and looked squarely at him. Lon forgot his problems for an instant. It was not the fact that she was feature by feature the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his life, and very evidently no product of Toro or the cow-country. He was not much of a lady-wrangler and it was his conviction that the prettier they were the more of a nuisance they generally proved themselves.

It was that in all his crowded twenty-four years, he had never been looked up and down so arrogantly. As if he were some queer animal. It jolted him off-balance to face those narrowing eyes and he tried to explain himself.

"Bynum sent me a telegram. To Fort Worth. You see, I'm Lon Cameron and I've been working in a livestock commission house up there. When I got this wire about my uncle — maybe you knew Earl Cameron who owned the U Bar?—I bought

myself a ticket and did what I never expected to do. I came back to Toro and—"

She turned away from him and looked up the street. It was quite clear that one smallish young man in shabby town clothes, claiming kin to the important U Bar owner, had been analyzed and ticketed and dismissed from her lordly thoughts. Lon gaped at her. He knew that his face was burning. For he was suddenly furious. Who she was, he had no slightest idea. But if she thought—

The Acme Saloon was four doors down the street from this store. While he drew a long breath and tried to collect the words he wanted to use, there came from the Acme the sound of a building being wrecked. If he had not turned, Lon could have believed that a gigantic hand had picked up the Acme and was shaking it to pieces. As he whirled, a man popped out of the Acme door rather like a grape-seed squirted. He ran with head down toward the Toro Store. Lon put out a hand and caught the runner.

"It's—it's them Hourglassers again!" the man gasped. "Three of 'em—going to kill Simon Mull!"

"Hourglass . . . Simon Mull . . ." Lon repeated bewilderedly.

Then he noticed the blond girl. She had turned slowly with sound of either the row in the Acme or the man's explanation. There was an amused smile on her red mouth. Somehow, that amusement seemed to be directed at Lon Cameron.

But he had no time for her, now. Simon Mull was an old U Bar man, a taciturn and competent little fellow who had gone up the trail in the old days with the two Camerons, Earl and "Little Ace," Lon's father.

Sudden quiet came in the Acme, after the crash and clatter of fighting. Then the hollow sound of a shot. Lon began to run. He came up to the Acme door and looked in upon the wreckage of tables and chairs and broken glass. Three men, abreast, were moving slowly down the bar-room with backs to him. One held a pistol vaguely pointed at the piled barrels beyond the bar-end.

Lon stared at them. What had set three of Jube Race's riders on one of Earl Cameron's he had no idea. But there was no time, now, for puzzling out the feud. Simon Mull must be behind the bar or sheltered beyond the whisky barrels. He slid inside.

"I'll finish that little cow-stealing son of a dog," the tall, dark man with the pistol said thickly.

Nobody seemed to hear Lon's entrance. He guessed that the overturned poker tables along the left wall hid customers. More were probably behind the bar. He looked around and saw nothing he could use as a weapon. Then he remembered that Minto James had always kept a bar-gun on a shelf at the end of the bar.

He tiptoed that way, watching the three Hourglassers. He lifted on his toes and looked over the bar. The shiny self-cocker was still there, but out of his reach. He looked again at the three backs.

"Come out from them kegs, Mull," the man with the pistol commanded. "You want folks to remember you took it from the front, don't you?"

As he laughed and the other Hourglass men joined in, Lon went over the bar. He snatched up Minto James' pistol. If it were empty, probably he and Simon Mull both were dead men. But brazen shellrims showed around the cylinder. He straightened as the three men whirled. He began shooting . . .

The two unarmed Hourglassers ran with his first shot. One lunged toward the back door. The other raced for the shelter of the tables on his right. The big man with the Colt fired at Lon.

They were both very wild. At five yards they emptied their pistols without scoring so much as a glancing hit. They stared

foolishly at each other. Then Lon saw Minto James' bungstarter on the floor. He bent and snatched it up, vaulted the bar and ran at the tall man.

The Hourglasser swung viciously with his Colt barrel, but Lon swerved aside and brought down the bungstarter on the other's pistol hand. The Colt dropped and Lon hammered the man back, flailing away until he landed a square blow on the head. As he saw the tall man drop, Simon Mull came out from his barricade of whisky barrels and picked up the broken back of a chair. The Hourglass man had risen from behind a table and was coming at Lon from the side with a bottle neck that was pointed with long spikes of glass. Mull hammered this warrior with his chairback and drove him toward the door out of which the discreet one had gone.

Lon and Mull stood panting, looking at each other. From the street door a slow, loud voice demanded to know what the devil the riot was about. Lon turned toward Clint Bynum.

The acting sheriff came down the room, a tall, grim man who looked older than Lon—which he was not. He had his gun out and from under reddish brows he looked right and left rather like an irritated bull. Men began to get up from behind the tables and come in through both doors.

Mull gestured toward the limp figure on the floor. Clint stared, nodded, then stooped and picked up the empty Colt.

"Benny Armstrong, there, picked one of his usual rows," Mull said evenly. "But when I was handling three Hourglassers with a chair, he pulled a gun and like to got me. I dove for them kegs yonder and —Lon knows the rest. I never seen much."

Lon explained his part in the battle. Armstrong moved and groaned. Clint Bynum poked him with a boot toe and Armstrong sat up. The swing doors flapped and a young towhead with a badge on his shirt, a gun in each hand, banged into the bar-room. Clint called this deputy Pres Shotwell, but continued to stare ominously at the Hourglass man.

"You know my town-law," he said. "It'll cost you fifty to forget about packing a gun. And fifty more for shooting it off. And if Simon Mull wants to swear out an assault-to-kill warrant *I* won't kick about plastering it all over your damn' neck. Take him along, Pres."

"Me? Swear out a warrant?" Mull snarled. "A U Bar man going to law about a damn' slinking Hourglasser? Not while I got even one laig off a chair to go up against that bunch of polecats."

"It'll Cost You Fifty To Forget About Packing A Gun!"

"Then take him to the judge," Clint Bynum instructed his deputy. "Regular fine on both charges. It would have served you exactly right, Armstrong, if Lon Cameron had shot your damn' head off. Only thing saved you is he never could hit the other side of the street with a short gun. You better remember about hanging up your cutter after this. I am bodaciously sick and tired of this damn' Hourglass and U Bar rowing."

"Let's pick up Wilbur Wright, then," Armstrong said in almost an unconcerned tone. He was staring viciously at Lon. "He's in town and he's got to pay me out."

Deputy Pres Shotwell looked inquiringly at his boss and Clint nodded. The two went out and Lon turned on Clint Bynum.

"And now," he said, "I'd really appreciate having somebody give me the straight on all this. Since when have the two big

outfits of Toro County been clawing each other? Has that by any chance got something to do with Uncle Earl disappearing? How did he disappear? When did he flap his wings? What makes you think he didn't just straddle that King horse of his and ride off the way he used to do often? And why did you wire?"

"Come on over and have a drink," Clint Bynum checked him. "Maybe I can kind of bring you up to today on this business. And maybe I can't! For it never has made sense to me—Earl Cameron and Jube Race claiming each one that the other was stealing from him. And I know both of them old hellions from the back clean through to their bone vest buttons. And both are friends of mine; I learned to rope on one outfit and rode on the other. It was the Hourglass and U Bar that put my father in the sheriff's office four years back. And when he died it was Jube and Earl saw to it I was made acting and filling out the old man's term till election. I owe 'em both a lot. And I don't like this mess a bit."

He led the way to the bar and waved off the officious customers who wanted to talk about Benny Armstrong. So they stood, the three of them, with a quart of *Four Roses* and their glasses. Simon Mull and Clint Bynum gulped down their drinks. Lon put his glass to his mouth, then lowered it untasted.

"About nine months back," Clint said slowly, "Jube Race complained he was losing stock. The old man was dying, then, and I was running the office. I looked around and couldn't locate any sign except the holes where the cows used to be—and the horses. Then Earl Cameron come in with the same complaint. I went out with him, too. Same story. Then Earl told me it was just a hoorah—Jube saying the Hourglass was losing anything. He claimed to have found tracks going toward the U Bar and Hourglass line fence."

He shrugged and reached for the bottle. Mull pushed his glass forward and the sheriff said irritably:

"Drink it down, Lon! You used to know how to punish it."

"Don't bother about me," Lon answered. "I can get liquor anywhere when I want it. What I came back for was a tale."

"Well, I got the two old hellions together, then. Jube claimed he had found sign of Hourglass stock crossing into U Bar range. And if I hadn't been between the two of 'em, along with old Quince Tucker the buyer, I reckon they would have shot each other. Since then, there has been hell to pay, no matter what I could tell 'em, that neither one would steal a dogified calf off anybody, much less off each other. Everybody has tried to reason with the old jugheads; Quince Tucker tried it and he has bought stock off both of 'em for twenty years."

"And so the old boys really believe that," Lon said frowningly. "Anybody get killed in the feud?"

"Not yet. But it won't be long. Take this business here, today. Earl hired him a range foreman name' Varner Haynes, a fattish man but deadly. Jube Race took on a foreman name' Wilbur Wright. Wright's a soft-spoken man from somewhere down in King Fisher's range. Neither one is anybody's soft spot. The two outfits have been going up and down spouting out fire and smoke. Haynes is ready to down Jube Race or Wright. Same the other way. It has got me wild."

"Then Uncle Earl disappeared," Lon prompted him.

"Yeh. He was in town snarling at Jube Race. I kept 'em from a fight. Jube left for the ranch with Marie Dyer—she's some distant kin of his from Vermont, living on the Hourglass since your time. But Wilbur Wright and Benny Armstrong had a row with Earl. After dark—and it *was* dark that night last week; not a sign of the moon—there was shooting on the edge of town. I hunted around, thinking it was

Earl Cameron and Wright and Armstrong smoking each other up. But we couldn't find a thing. Same the next day. And Earl had disappeared!"

CHAPTER II
Trouble Shooter

Lon moved his glass in little circles on the bar, frowning. Clint Bynum refilled his own glass and Mull's. Lon watched and shook his head slightly. Evidently, this trouble was worrying Clint; had taught him to drink . . .

"Wright and Armstrong was easy to find," Mull volunteered abruptly. "But Earl was not to be found—and his horse and saddle was still at the corral. We found a pool of blood where the shooting had been; found it the next day. But from that time to now, nobody has found Earl. So—"

"So I sent you that telegram after I'd gone to Nathan Grace and talked things over. If anybody would know, I thought, it'd be Nathan. He was Earl's lawyer for years. He said to wire you."

"What for?" Lon demanded frowningly. "You ought to know how I stood with Uncle Earl. When Dad sold out his half of the U Bar to him and lost his shirt in that crazy townsite scheme, he had to work for Uncle Earl until he died. I worked for him, too—until we fell out because I wanted to run my own affairs. And he washed his hands of me after that last squabble. Said I was a disgrace to the Cameron name because I was wild and drunken and too cocky. Even if he has disappeared, I'm not in it—"

"No? You ain't a thing but the sole heir to about four hundred square miles of cow outfit. That's every last thing you are. Earl Cameron's will says so. That's why Nathan told me to wire you. But before you can step in, Earl has got to be found, one way or other. Alive, I hope. But his body has got to be located, if what I think is right: If he was killed here in Toro and packed out somewhere to hide the murder."

Lon stared at him. It seemed impossible that Earl Cameron had willed him the great U Bar outfit. He remembered his father as a man hard-headed, heavy-fisted, weak only on the subject of land speculation. Earl Cameron had never had a soft spot; had never shown it, anyway. It was hard to think of the fierce little man as dead. But much harder to believe that he had softened toward his brother's son before dying.

"One thing," Clint Bynum said abruptly. "If you aim to get any good out of being left the U Bar, step wide of Wilbur Wright! He's poison with a six-shooter. I don't think anybody on the Hourglass'll talk to you—Jube, I mean, and Mis' Race, and this forty-umpth cousin of Jube's, Marie Dyer. Least of all her; you ain't met her and you won't like it when you do—"

"Wait a minute! Is she a pretty blond girl, who kind of rolls her big, blue eyes at you and holds her nose and makes a face because you smell?"

"Oh, you did meet her, then," Clint grunted. For the first time, something like a grin lifted the corners of his hard-lipped mouth. "Yeh, that's the proposition—and colder'n a—well, she has chilled everybody around here to the bone. Except Wilbur Wright. She seems to like him all right and he sends back the same. But she don't think much of cowfolks and particular-lee the kind that wear a U Bar iron. So you better watch out for her and for Wilbur Wright."

He straightened and said without pleasure that he was to meet some of the county commissioners. Simon Mull also moved reluctantly away from the bar. He was merely passing through town on his way to Crow Flat line camp where he and two others of the U Bar riders would comb the brush for cattle.

"See you at the house," he told Lon, and went on out.

Lon and Clint left the Acme together. On the street Clint hesitated a moment, then shrugged big shoulders:

"It's got me scratching gravel, boy," he admitted. "If I don't see the end of this fool rowing between the two outfits, I'll be out asking you for a job—and the boss out there ain't fond enough of me to have me around. Varner Haynes. But if I can patch up these troubles, I can be elected. And I want the job, Lon. I want it like hell. I'm glad you're back. You never was cut out to be checking cows for a commission house. Out here is your place and—I'm damn' glad you're back."

It was growing late. Lon grinned suddenly. He wanted to eat one of "Aunt" Lou's suppers at the Toro House. He went up the street, meeting curious stares from men he had known well in his years on the U Bar as from those whose faces were strange. Occasionally an old acquaintance halted him and sympathized with him over his uncle's disappearance. Everybody, he observed, believed that Earl Cameron had been killed by the Hourglass men and carried out to some lonely place for burial. A name began to recur in his thoughts—Benny Armstrong . . .

He went into the Toro House dining room. A waitress told him that Aunt Lou was over in Lynchester for the day. So he looked around the big room and, with sight of Marie Dyer at a table, alone, he stared critically.

She was more than pretty. She was beautiful. And he liked her not at all. But he walked toward her and his own hazel eyes narrowed when she looked calmly through him.

"I'd like to talk to you, Miss Dyer," he said quietly. "I think it's important to more than me that I do talk to you. So if you'll bear with a plain cowboy for a few minutes—"

He sat down and she ignored him utterly. But he leaned on the table and faced her.

"I want to talk about this foolishness that's been going on, between the Hourglass and the U Bar. This talk that Jube Race would steal a calf from the U Bar, or that Earl Cameron would touch an Hourglass animal. I happen to know both of 'em. My father and my uncle built up the U Bar while Jube Race was making an outfit across the line. They neighbored for years. They fought renegades off the reservations and thieves from below the River—fought together. They organized this county and kept it out of crooked hands. The Race and Cameron names *mean* something in this part of Texas. And now I come back to hear that the two outfits are having a feud!"

She looked stonily into his eyes.

"There is nothing whatever that I have to say to you or to any other person on the U Bar. The sheriff should be able to tell you anything you *really* want to know, about the thieves who have been raiding the Hourglass herds. He knows as much as either Jube Race or Wilbur Wright. He simply doesn't act upon that information. Now, you had better go . . . Someone is coming who can do more than talk."

Lon turned to watch the big man coming toward the table. Wilbur Wright — he knew instinctively that it was Wright — was as blond as Marie Dyer. But his eyes were smokily blue and his small mustache brown in contrast to the yellow hair which he wore somewhat long. He moved deliberately and with a certain air of being turned aside for nothing in his path.

"This," the girl said in a cold voice, "is annoying me, Will. I'll appreciate it if you'll—"

Wright stared down at Lon without expression. And when he moved it was without warning. His right hand came in view

and a water carafe he had picked up from the table behind him crashed across Lon's temple.

Voices disturbed him, after that. He was in a dark room but light was coming slowly, very slowly . . . He sat up and blinked about him. He had been in the saloon with Clint. But he had left the Acme—then he remembered! He swore furiously and began to get up from the floor of the Toro House veranda. Clint Bynum's voice checked him.

"I have told all you Hourglassers and U Bar men, Wright, that I'm not going to have you bringing a war into town. And you started this one. You hit Lon Cameron when he wasn't expecting it and—"

"Never mind that," Lon told him thickly, scrambling to his feet. "I never have whined because a son of a dog hit me when I wan't looking. I won't start now. I'll just see that this particular son never gets another chance. I—"

"I'm big and easy to see," Wilbur Wright said amusedly. "When this time comes—if ever a U Bar cowthief sees it come—I'll be handy."

"That'll do from both of you," Clint snapped. "In Toro you won't do a damn' thing. Not either one of you. I never have taken sides in this trouble. I'm not going to begin now. I'm telling you, Wright, and you, Lon, there'll be no smoking it up in Toro. You had better remember it or you'll land in the *juzgado*. Pres" —he turned to his deputy —"you keep Lon in sight for the time being. I'll handle Wright."

"I'm not making threats," Wright told the group of them generally. "Don't have to. But I will prophecy. This is one of the Stealing Camerons and he'll be trying to carry on the family way. So I'll get a crack at him on Hourglass range."

"One li'l bitsy thing I have noticed, in the short time I've been back," Lon said as calmly. "That is, this stealing started about the time you hit Toro County. So, likely, I'll line you over the sights of a Winchester on U Bar range. And when I do—you'll see the difference between long and short guns. And when you're dead, we'll try to figure out your real name, not your Toro go-by. Now, I'm going to eat supper."

He turned abruptly away from them all. His head was clear. Beyond a sizable lump, he was uninjured. He went almost cheerfully into the dining room. Marie Dyer was not there, now. Pres Shotwell lounged in the door until Lon called him over. The deputy sat down with him and Lon bought supper for them both. He liked the efficient young towhead and Shotwell had heard much of the one-time "terror of Toro." They got on well.

"You Wouldn't Think It To Look At His Long, Sad Face"

"You wouldn't think it, to look at his long, sad face," Lon told Shotwell as they walked back toward the Acme from the Toro House. "But there was a time when Sheriff Clint was just about hell-on-wheels. We used to rope that seventeen hand wooden harness-shop horse off the sidewalk regular, and start him rolling. Old Linnenkohl, the harness-maker, would come out—"

He leaned to the grinning deputy and jerked the Colt from Shotwell's holster—the towhead was left-handed—as a man stepped around a corner and lifted a hand. The two fired almost together but it was Lon's shot that hit the mark. He saw the man stagger and ran in, thumbing back the hammer of Shotwell's gun. He fired again

at less than two yards range. The man dropped.

"Come on, Pres," Lon called to the deputy without turning. "I think he's settled. I just happened to hear his foot scrape a tin can and looked up in time to see him. And there was just light enough to make out that gun in his fist."

Shotwell came up and, while Lon covered the still figure, scratched a match close to the man's face. He grunted.

"That was a damn' good shot," he said. "Benny Armstrong, and you hit him once in the body, once in the head."

CHAPTER III
Range Secrets

Clint Bynum looked curiously at Lon, after the inquest. It was a bright morning. Hard to believe—Lon thought—that back there in the court room he had just been exonerated for the killing of the first man he had ever even seen killed.

"I'm going to hire a horse and ride out to the house," he told Clint. "I need to talk to somebody who knows something and with Nathan Grace in San Antonio, Varner Haynes is the man."

"You won't need to hire a horse," Clint grunted. "I have got a big *palomina* and an extra saddle. If you think you can still hang onto a real horse, after playing around the stock yards, I'll loan Funeral to you."

"I'll do my best to fool Funeral," Lon said gravely. "The last time I rode a snorty horse was in Fort Worth. They had a kind of rodeo there and I was out of practice. All I could get was firsts in the steer riding and the bronc' busting. Reckon the sidewalks have got me down. I won't need your saddle. Linnenkohl has got a hull that just suits my plain taste. And I filled up a carbine scabbard, too . . . Where-at's this Funeral?"

They got the *palomina* from Clint's corral and Lon led him to the little German's harness-shop. He had saddled Funeral and was looking over the job when Jube Race and Marie Dyer came up to him and halted. Lon nodded colorlessly to the huge old man.

"So you come back, Lonny," Jube said in his high, petulant voice. "Going to take charge of the U Bar?"

"That's a kind of general idea of it," Lon told him. "And there's a question I am glad you're here to answer for me: Do you really put stock in this tale about U Bar stealing from you—and you stealing from the U Bar? I'd like to know."

"Put plenty stock in half the tale," Jube Race said evenly. "That half about the Hourglass losing and the U Bar stealing. No doubt about that much. We found the tracks!"

Lon studied the red moonface. He gathered up his reins:

"All right! I wanted to know. All this came up while I was trying to be a city slicker around the North Fort Worth yards. So there's a slew of loose ends for me to pick up. But I have got a good sized notion that I'll pick 'em up—and that your brand-new foreman will be tangled in some of the dirtiest. In fact, after that little business with one of your prize cutthroats, last night, I have an idea that the time will come when I'll send Mr. Wilbur Wright walking on Armstrong's heels!"

Jube Race laughed. But it was at Marie Dyer that Lon stared and her amusement was expressed by no more than a smile.

"You don't think so? Well . . . in the *alforja*, there, is the Bisley six-shooter I killed Armstrong with. It seemed such a good cutter that I bought Pres Shotwell a new gun and took it. Because it's the first pistol I ever handled that I could hit something with. Naturally, with Wright on my trail I value it. You're wrong, Mr. Race. And *you're* wrong, Miss Dyer. I will kill Wright, for stealing U Bar cattle. But *I*

do my killing in the open and I don't hide the bodies!"

For the first time the girl stared at him without the stony contempt which had seemed her usual, natural, expression. Guessing at her thought, he said grimly:

"If Earl Cameron was murdered and dropped in a hole, why can't Jube Race go into the same hole? Well, there's a reason. I'm not the slinking murderer that Wright and Armstrong were."

And he turned to the *palomina* and swung up. He rode the dozen miles on the west pike used jointly by U Bar and Hourglass and Tom Uplinn's Spear outfit. It was all pleasantly familiar, and only thought of fierce little Earl Cameron kept him grim of face, with the magnificent *palomina* surging tirelessly under him. His range, all his now, because his uncle had believed in turning to his kin even when he had quarreled with that kin. The least he could do was settle the mystery behind Earl Cameron's death and pay off every man responsible.

He thought of Wilbur Wright—and of Marie Dyer. The big, handsome foreman he dismissed from consideration. One way or another, he felt that he and Wright were due to meet face to face and when that time came Wright might kill him but he was certainly going to kill Wright. As for the girl—

"Ignorant fool," he said contemptuously. "Comes out from a two-by-four town in Vermont and thinks Texas is all the same, except that we wear pants with no seats to 'em, and wide hats. Can't even understand Jube Race. And as for Wright, she believes anything *he* hands to her. But she'll learn."

A cowboy of thin, hard face was fitting new whangleather latigoes to his saddle when Lon rode up behind the long log-and-adobe house of the U Bar. Lon nodded to the cowboy and received a slight head motion in return. Then the man's shifty eyes went back to his work. Lon swung down and began to unsaddle Funeral. In the kitchen door a tiny figure, wearing a flour sack for apron, was framed for a minute. Then the cook came out.

"My name's Lon Cameron," Lon told him. "Where's everybody?"

"I'm Britt, the cook," the little man said slowly, prominent green eyes roving up and down Lon. He had a suggestion of Cockney accent. He rubbed a blocky chin with his hand. "Haynes, 'e's foreman, you know, is over around Teepee Butte with Taylor and Rogers, two of the hands. This is Sparrow. Mull and Upton and Ward are at Crow Flat—"

"I saw Mull in town, on his way over," Lon nodded. "Is that the list of the U Bar spread? Just Mull and 'Pache Upton and Cowhouse Ward left, of the old bunkhouse crowd?"

Britt nodded and Sparrow's pale eyes came sliding up, and away again when he saw Lon looking at him.

"Been changes, last few months," Sparrow mumbled.

"Plenty of changes," Lon agreed. "The county over. I don't like what I've seen of 'em, either."

"But what can you *do* about it?" Sparrow drawled. "Everybody knows what the old man thought about *you* . . . Trifling drunk was the kindest thing I ever heard him say about you. Hey, Duke?"

The cook said nothing. He was watching Lon who, in his turn, stared at Sparrow. Interruption came—a bunch of riders jogging toward the corral. Lon turned Funeral inside and went to hang up his saddle. In the shed he grinned suddenly and took the Bisley Colt from a saddle bag. When he came outside to meet three men, including the squat, round-bodied Varner Haynes, the gun was in his waistband under his shirt.

"So you're the wandering relation, huh?" Haynes said meditatively. "Nathan Grace send for you?"

"No," Lon said with some truth, "I haven't seen or heard from Grace in a couple of years. But word came to me about Uncle Earl disappearing, so I came back."

"For what?" Haynes grunted. There was something about the stillness of his big face that reminded Lon of Wilbur Wright. He recalled what Clint Bynum had said of the two men. "Your uncle told me a good many times what he thought of you. No matter what's happened, he wouldn't want you on the place. Besides," he added slowly, "he made a will before he died. I ain't seen it but I can guess what's in it. You helled yourself out of a cow-outfit, helled some California relations into it."

"You mean, you don't want me on the place," Lon nodded.

"No," Haynes corrected him, grinning, "I mean a damn sight more'n that. I mean I won't have you on the place. Not even for a meal and a sleep. You go right back in the shed and get your hull and put it on that *palomina*. Then you hightail."

Behind him a stocky cowboy half-lifted his pistol from the holster. The two of them with Haynes, like Sparrow, were grinning at Lon. Duke Britt stood watching, green eyes going from face to face. Lon nodded and turned toward the harness-shed. So his back was to all but Britt. He turned quickly back, the Bisley rising. He moved like a cat across the feet between him and Haynes and rammed the gun-muzzle into the fat man's belly.

"The first move that's made that I don't like, you get a slug through you," he told Haynes. "I wanted to see what kind of insides you have got. Now, I know. You bet there's a will, you lying son! A will that leaves the U Bar to me lock, stock and barrel. And I'm taking charge! You and these pets of yours will roll your beds—without a meal or a sleep. You can collect what's due you when Nathan Grace comes back to Toro."

Past Haynes' heavy shoulder he saw the amazed faces of Rogers and Taylor and Sparrow. He saw something else suddenly; the jerk of Duke Britt's hand from under Duke's flour sack apron. Before he could kill Haynes, or twist the Bisley around to try killing the cook, the Cockney's voice rose:

"H'all right—Boss! Hi'm plying 'er stryght acrost the board wif you. The first bloody fool as mykes a move—'e tykes it in the belly!"

The ancient single action was steady as a rock upon the three punchers. The green eyes shone.

"Good enough, English!" Lon cried. "Now, Haynes—"

Suddenly, the foreman laughed. He put back his head, ignoring the shove of the

Bisley's muzzle in his paunch. He laughed until the tears came into his small, shrewd eyes.

"All right, son! You don't have to blow a hole in my guts, to make me see reason. You win! Let's start at the beginning."

Lon backed cautiously away. Duke Britt held the punchers under his six-shooter. Haynes' gun was in its holster on fat right thigh. Lon studied the fat man—and the more he looked, the less he liked or trusted his uncle's "deadly" foreman. But it was no part of his play, here, to show his hand prematurely.

"If you really feel that way," he said in a doubtful tone, "go ahead. What *is* the beginning?"

Haynes laughed again and turned with a jerk of the head toward the punchers.

"Ex-act. We'll do one or the other. Either way, you rod the spread till it's settled. And—I reckon you have heard the tale of what the Hourglass has been doing to us? If you never, let me tell you, right now, that this feller Wright on the Hourglass is my pet, special affair. Even if you rod the U Bar, *he* belongs to me. Get that!"

"I've heard plenty," Lon told him. "Now, I want to hear a lot about the outfit. What's left on the place—after all this stealing? Where have you got it? What are you aiming to do? Has Nathan Grace told you just to go ahead and run things until Uncle Earl is found, one way or another?"

"He sent word for me to go on as usual. As for the stock—around Teepee Butte is

"One Way Or Another We'll Settle This Mystery"

"I never thought I'd see the day I misjudged ary man," he said whimsically. "But that's what I done with you. Might've knowed even a young Cameron was likely to be something special with a cutter. Well, you was not too popular with Earl Cameron, the way he told it to us once in a spell. And you popped up on the place today and, naturally, nobody took you for more'n the nephew that was kicked off, oncet. If you had come out with the story of that will—*'sta bueno!* But you never. So—"

"I'm rodding the spread, don't make any mistake about that," Lon warned him. There was something unnatural about this sudden change of face. He trusted Haynes the less for his apparent acceptance of the will. "One way or another, we'll settle the mystery about what happened to Uncle Earl. Either we'll find him alive and he'll go on in charge of the U Bar, or—"

four-five hundred head of big steers. Nearer five hundred than four. Mixed stuff is mostly in Earth Mound Pasture. Hawses is between Crow Flat and Moccasin Tank. Reckon they always have run that pasture since you can remember. Well, Quince Tucker has been on a deal with us for four hundred steers. But around the Butte the range is et down pretty much and me and your uncle stalled off Tucker."

"How-come?" Lon inquired innocently. But he did not fail to see Duke Britt stiffen and look furtively at him.

"You ought to know that old fox! He's still renting pasture from the Spear. He wants to take U Bar steers right now, calling 'em dogies. And us with the whole south side of the range to do our own fattening on! So we will move the steers south and give Tucker the laugh. I don't take off my hat to no man, on finishing off feeding. Our steers'll look like Kansas

stuff, when I call Quince Tucker in next time, to look 'em over."

"Well, we'll see about that, tomorrow," Lon told him.

CHAPTER IV
Snake Tracks

DUKE BRITT went back to his cooking with a blank face. But Lon—with a face as blank—moved around the house until he got the cook alone. He looked curiously at the little Englishman.

"I'm playing you for a friend. Spill it," he said.

"Boss never meant to move the steers up to where the Hourglass could run 'em off," Britt said in a rush, underbreath. " 'E was lying—Haynes. Sparrow and Rogers and Taylor are men 'e put on. The boss put me 'ere. Bloody queer . . . "

Haynes' talk, at supper, was even more queer, Lon thought. He spoke of what he was going to do to the Hourglass men, particularly to Wilbur Wright. Lon said:

"Only one thing, Haynes. This stealing has been going on for months, as I get it. You have been here for seven or eight months. Yet not a thief has blossomed from a cottonwood, or cashed in from lead poisoning. So far as I know, I'm packing the only notch for an Hourglass man. I killed Armstrong."

He thought that their surprise was real. Sparrow and Rogers—Taylor had taken a bite in the kitchen and ridden away on some chore or other—stared at him. He told the story briefly and Haynes shook his head admiringly.

"Takes a Cameron to do it!" he complimented Lon. "Well, we may have got off to a slow start, but don't you think, Boss, we will end up that way! No, sir! Now, about them steers—"

They talked for a half-hour about canny Quince Tucker and his schemes for depreciating the stock he bought. But when Lon went to bed in what had been Earl Cameron's room, the orders stood as he had given them before supper—the steers would not be moved until he had inspected the whole range.

He was waked by a scratching at his window. With the Bisley in his hand he got quietly out of bed. Outside all was inky dark. But a grayish sheet of paper showed on the windowsill. He called softly to whoever had put it there, but got no answer. So, in the shelter of his bed he flicked a match and lighted a candle. Squatting there, he read quickly—and amazedly.

> Pup has come and took charge. Am playen him and he will soon ete off my hand. Tell Tucker and Upplin will moove steers south tomorro. Will play boy until we clean upp.

Beneath this scrawl someone had penciled in good English:

> Taken from the thief Taylor, who carried it from Haynes to Wright on the Hourglass. Taylor is in the cottonwoods east of the rock cliffs on Race Creek. But he will not tell anything. Quince Tucker brought both Wright and Haynes to Toto County to clean Hourglass and U Bar. The Spear is his holding ground. You can trust Mull and Upton and Ward. Haynes sent them to Crow Flat to get them out of the way. The steers will go to the south pasture and be stolen. Then the rest of the U Bar stock from all pastures. It is your fight.

The candle guttered in the tiny breeze from the open window while Lon stared at this simple explanation of everything that had puzzled him. Quince Tucker! Of course! He had the perfect cover for wholesale thefts, with his buys from every outfit in the country. Nobody would ever ask him what *he* was doing with a bunch of U Bar cattle.

"Simple! Dead simple!" Lon grunted softly. "And so you're going to shove the steers in spite of me, Mr. Haynes. Going to have me eating out of your hand

until the U Bar is stripped. Well, maybe we can put a spoke in that wheel. We'll try!"

It was not yet three o'clock. He dressed quickly and went out of the window to which the messenger had come—and he wondered who that messenger might be, who wrote so clearly about the wholesale thefts in Toro County. But there was no way to guess an answer, tonight. He saddled quietly, praising Clint's breaking of the *palomina* as the big horse stood to be cinched. He rode away from the corral in the direction of the Spear.

By sunrise he was well into Tom Uplinn's range and with the coming of light to those pastures he began to see proof of the charge made by that unknown writer who—he was sure—had killed Taylor on Race Creek on the Hourglass range.

For here were cattle of many brands and some, he was pretty sure, had been skillfully shifted from one iron to another. For cows moved across the *palomina's* course with both ears gotched off close to their heads; cows with one ear pointed had the look of animals whose earmarks had originally been something else.

Then, nearing the house of Uplinn and riding without attempt at concealment, or fear of being seen, he rode from a brush patch out into the open and saw three men sitting their horses not a hundred yards away. Quince Tucker's stooping little figure he recognized instantly; behind the buyer was the squat, wide, Indian-dark Uplinn. The third man he did not name to himself until he had jogged across the pasture closer to the trio. It was a tall, angular and florid man, with small, furtive, light gray eyes. Casselberry, his name was, and he had a mysterious past.

"Just looking for you, Mr. Tucker," Lon said gravely to the little buyer. "I landed on the U Bar yesterday and as soon as Haynes told me what the outfit's been bucking, I thought of you. If anybody in this county knows things, you ought to."

"Bad business," Tucker nodded. His red-rimmed blue eyes were, like his leathery face, very solemn. "First the squabble between yo' uncle and Jube Race, then Earl just disappearing the way he done. You—taking charge of the U Bar?"

"According to the will it's mine if Uncle Earl's dead."

"Then I reckon you ain't going to bust no hamestring proving he ain't," the dark Uplinn said, and laughed. Casselberry only sat moveless in the saddle, his little eyes on Lon. "Reckon that's a shore shot!"

"It's maybe a sure shot, but it goes a mile off the bull," Lon told Uplinn sharply. "I had my arguments with him, but he was too good a man to let be murdered by the damn' Hourglass and dropped in a hole somewhere like a dead horse. And if there's a chance he's still alive I want to find him. Mr. Tucker, Haynes seems a good, smart manager. But he's not hitting the Hourglass hard enough, seems to me. He must be a good man or Uncle Earl wouldn't have put him rodding the U Bar. But I would like to talk everything over with you."

"Fair enough," the buyer agreed. "You know me and yo' folks has been good friends for years. Anything I can do, I will do. I have got some work here—tell you: I'll meet you over on the Spear east line, about where the Hourglass and U Bar lines hit it, come noon. Mebbe"—he let his eyes flicker toward Uplinn, then back to Lon, as if it were a warning—"I'll think of something inter-est-ing to tell you. I been mulling things over. . . ."

Lon nodded gravely and turned away. When he looked back, only Tucker and Uplinn sat their horses where he had left them. And when he had got over a ridge, he sheltered himself in a cottonwood motte and watched. A tall figure on a buckskin horse—Casselberry had ridden a buckskin—flashed over a ridge far to his left and

rode fast on a course that paralleled Lon's own, going toward the spot where the lines of the three outfits came together in a T. Lon drew his Winchester from the scabbard.

"Now, we're seeing things," he said between his teeth. "All right, Mr. Casselberry! I never did like that ugly face of yours and if you're hunting me, you'll collect some excitement."

He watched Casselberry out of sight, then sent the *palomina* forward until he came to a brushy stretch a half-mile or so in width. He pulled in and listened but, hearing nothing of the other rider, he went slowly into the brush. Casselberry was closer than he had thought. His warning came only with sound of the tall man's shot. He went out of the saddle and flopped moveless on the ground. Small sounds of a man afoot carried to him. He waited, head a trifle lifted, the carbine ready.

Around a brush clump Casselberry came, very like a gaunt panther stalking a calf. His rifle was down across his belly as if he intended to make a hipshot. Lon fired twice and saw the man spin about; fired again and scrambled to his feet as Casselberry dropped face-downward. He went across to the killer and lifted him. Casselberry was dead.

"My short gun shooting is one thing," Lon said between his teeth, lowering at Tucker's assassin. "And my Winchester work is something else—as some of you murderers are due to find out."

He went back to the *palomina* and mounted. And Funeral lifted his head, pointing in the direction of the Spear house, the direction from which Lon had come.

"Sounds like the whole damn' Spear outfit!" Lon told the horse. "We had better get out of this, fast."

But it was slow work, crossing that brush. And some of the Spear men took a short-cut. He found himself followed within a half-mile and only Funeral's speed carried him over a ridge and out of range. He rode cautiously, watchfully, during the rest of the forenoon and in early afternoon. He wanted to make Crow Flat but there were too many men scattered on the U Bar and Hourglass range behind him, searching like so many hounds.

"I reckon we're orphans in the storm, Funeral," Lon grinned. "But if you can stand it, I can! Only trouble is, we're being pushed farther away from Crow Flat, while Haynes and his merry men are probably delivering our big steers to Mr. Tucker. Something tells me that we'll sleep out, tonight."

And sleep out they did, hidden in an arroyo. Before daylight Lon was in the saddle and crossing a stretch of Hourglass range that made a shortcut to Crow Flat.

"Unless," he informed Funeral grimly, "some of the Hourglassers sight me. Then it may be the long way over."

He came to Race Creek and with sight of the water in its limestone bed he thought of the luckless Taylor. Impulse came to turn up the clear stream, passing the white cliffs, and approaching the cottonwoods of which the note had spoken. It was broad day by the time he reached the trees. And this was on the straight road to the Hourglass house. But he was curious to know if the man he was forced to kill had been found.

He came quietly away from the creek and rode into the motte. There was Taylor, sprawled upon his side with a carbine under him. His eyes were open, but sightless. Lon studied the hard ground, but could tell little except that Taylor had been shot from the saddle and that his horse had run away. He was frowning down at the dead man when Marie Dyer rose from behind a boulder on the far side of the motte. She came toward him, smil-

ing unpleasantly. He watched her with blank face.

"The murderer returns to the scene of the crime," she said acidly. "What is the order of the murders? This poor devil first and then the man Casselberry on the Spear? You threaten to set a record, even for Toro County! First Armstrong—even though you did manage some sort of exoneration in that case. Now, two more. Who is next? It shouldn't matter—your telling. You will be hanged just as thoroughly for one man as for a half-dozen."

But, for all her hard calm, he noticed that she did not look squarely at Taylor. Part of that, perhaps a large part, was a mask she wore. He made a cigarette and lighted it.

"I wonder why you took such a dislike to me," he said calmly. "I can understand why I don't like you. I can't imagine anybody liking you. But up and down and by and large, a good many people have been friends of mine. Maybe it's because you're naturally the sort that goes for a snake like Wright. Being that kind, you wouldn't like an average decent man. You're pretty far off from Jube Race in blood, I heard. That must be right. Nobody like you in the Race family that I ever heard about. But I do wonder about you—what you think of yourself; how you feel when you look into the mirror. But, I reckon, you are satisfied."

"So much talk to keep from talking about—this!"

But her face was furiously red. Her pointing hand shook.

"Nothing to talk about. Somebody killed Taylor as he was riding toward the Hourglass. Why a U Bar man would be going that way, I couldn't tell you, even if I could guess—"

"You did guess! And that's the explanation. He probably decided to desert your thieves and tell Mr. Race or Mr. Wright. You followed him and killed him. You killed Casselberry, unarmed—"

"I'll take him, now," Wilbur Wright said from behind Lon. "Thanks for keeping him talking. Well, fella . . . "

CHAPTER V
Ambush

Lon did not turn. He continued to stare at the girl, even after Wright's gun punched him in the back. She faced him triumphantly, but under his small, contemptuous grin reddened again.

"Rifle's on the saddle, Wright," he said, turning slowly. "What did you kill Taylor for? Was he one of your thieves?"

He continued to turn with apparent submission. Wright was close to him, cocked pistol at waist-level. With the question, instinctively the tall man's eyes shuttled to the dead man. And Lon struck desperately at the slightly sagging Colt, knocked it aside and heard it explode, then caught Wright's wrist with left hand while he smashed a furious blow into the other's belly. He struck three times and Wright still pulled against his fingers. He beat the bigger man back by the sheer savagery of his attack. He twisted and Wright's hand relaxed on the pistol handle.

Lon kicked the dropped gun aside and jerked the Bisley out of his waistband. It was grimly pleasant to club the barrel over Wright's head and watch him drop—as *he* had dropped in the dining room of the Toro House. Foolish, though, he knew. He should have killed him. He stood looking somberly from Wright to the staring, incredulous girl, then bent to pick up the pistol. He shoved it into his waistband.

"You'll hang for Casselberry, if not for Taylor," Marie Dyer said shakily. "Earl Cameron was a thief and possibly he would have been a murderer, too, with opportunity. But there's no doubt about his nephew. You have wiped out the U Bar, though. You can be sure of that. You thought to improve on the stealing and

other crime, but you weren't clever enough. All you have managed is to destroy the Camerons in Toro County."

He looked down at Wilbur Wright. Knowing what he knew, he thought he could see farther than even Quince Tucker. Wright was no man to be used as a tool, then discarded. If the game were played out as, doubtless, Tucker had planned it, he wondered how long Wright intended Tucker to live? Haynes? Jube Race? and this girl—Wright must have his plans for her.

"No," he said abruptly, "I haven't done any such thing. And you'll see the day you know that; when you know what I know now. I haven't ruined the U Bar. I didn't kill Taylor. I don't know who did. But you'll see the time when you have to admit to yourself that I was right all the way, you were wrong in the same amount. Jube Race will admit it to me, but you can admit it to yourself and save me having to look at you again."

He walked back to Funeral and mounted. Wright's horse was in a jumble of boulders near the creek. He took the Winchester from Wright's scabbard and smashed it with blows against a tree. Then he rode fast away from the creek and circled and doubled back until he felt safe to go straight for Crow Flat. By noon he was watching the stone cabin from a hilltop. The door was open and there were two horses staked behind the camp.

He worked down an arroyo and covered the open space in a noiseless run. No sound came from the cabin for a while, then little Simon Mull said complainingly:

"Well, I wisht he would git here!"

Lon moved down the wall to the door and stepped inside with the Bisley forethoughtedly down along his leg.

"If you mean me," he said, "here I am!"

But not the two men he expected were alone here. Mull and Cowhouse Ward hunkered against a wall, smoking. But beyond were Pres Shotwell and a grim young man unknown to Lon. The young deputy stared, then grinned pleasantly:

"Well! Now, maybe we can start something."

"No funny business," Lon warned him. "Who's that fellow?"

"Name's Lethermon," Pres said calmly. "Deputy, same's me. Clint sent us both out; just kept Sanford in the office. Seems you have got some work for us to do."

Lon stared at him blankly. He suspected some trick. Word of Casselberry's killing had probably got to Clint by now and if a murder charge were filed, Clint would serve the warrant. Lon did not believe that news of Taylor's death had reached the sheriff so quickly. But the Casselberry affair must be known.

"Got a note for you," Pres told him. "Can I move my hand to take it out? Here you are!"

He flipped over the folded paper taken from a shirt pocket. Still holding the Bisley ready, Lon worked the note open with his left hand and stared at the familiar writing of Clint Bynum:

"Use Pres and Lethermon in your war. Go to it, boy!"

"Don't ask me about it," Pres grinned. "All I know is what Clint told us—to pack that note to you and side you."

Cross-examination showed nothing but that Clint had talked privately with someone the day before and had come back to the office to write the note and send Shotwell and Lethermon out. The silent Lethermon grunted:

"Outside of that Mex' kid, Cris Robles, I never seen Clint talking to anybody. But—what's to do?"

Lon suddenly pushed the Bisley into his waistband again and crossed to the fireplace. He squatted there to reach for cold beans and Dutch oven biscuit. Someone was moving in this matter and keeping covered. If that mysterious person had killed

Taylor and recovered Haynes' note and brought it to him with additions, it was believable that he had also talked to Clint. And that loyal soul, informed as to Quince Tucker's part in the schemes and steals of Toro County, would act precisely as he had done. He ate and mulled over the whole affair.

"All right," he said at last. "Here's what I know. Quince Tucker looked this country over and decided that both outfits could be cleaned up. So he brought in two boss-thieves. Somehow, he planted 'em on the Hourglass and the U Bar—"

They listened amazedly while he told his story. Then little Simon Mull looked at Cowhouse Ward and smacked his hard fist against a palm. Cowhouse was nodding.

"That's it!" Cowhouse grunted. "Couldn't be no otherwise."

"Where's 'Pache Upton?" Lon asked. "We have to get going and, if there's a man in Toro County that can touch me with a Winchester, it's that cock-eyed squaw man."

"He'll be along pretty soon," Mull said. "And six of us ought to be plenty to smack them thieves like they never dreamed of being hit!"

Upton, another dark, fierce little man, came into the cabin before Lon had caught up missed meals. The six rode in the general direction of the U Bar house and found only occasional strays on the range. Which bore out Lon's belief that Haynes and Rogers and Sparrow had worked the steers to the south pasture along the Hourglass line—and convenient to the Spear fence, once the steers were over the Hourglass boundary.

At the house was nobody but Duke Britt. Lon told the cook frankly what he had told the others and the Cockney nodded. He had not seen anybody since the day before. He pulled off his apron and from a corner of the kitchen got a .45-90 Winchester and belt of shells.

"When Hi was in India wif the British Harmy," he said calmly, "Hi 'ad a medal for shooting . . . "

He saddled a horse and they were seven, riding away from the house.

There were no steers along the Hourglass line and Lon led them into Jube Race's range on the way to the Spear. They met no Hourglass riders on the ride toward Uplinn's log cabin.

"If Quince Tucker is just on the Spear," he told his side pleasantly, "I would like to put a rope around the old illegitimate's neck and around Uplinn's, too. I will bet you that they could tell us more interesting things."

"I Know Some Little Things That'll Make 'Em Talk"

"Don't need no rope," 'Pache Upton grunted. "When I was living among the Injuns—"

Simon Mull and Cowhouse Ward called wearily upon their Maker and 'Pache snarled contemptuously at them.

"A' right! You damn' nesters think you know so much! When I was with the Injuns I seen some li'l' things that just to talk about 'em will give Quince and Uplinn the shakes for a month. You let me handle them two, Lon. They'll beg to talk!"

They surrounded the cabin which was headquarters for the Spear men and waited for light. It came, but pale in a cloudy sky that threatened a downpour. 'Pache predicted that it would rain within an hour. Simon Mull and Cowhouse clucked at him reprovingly, reminding him that only fools

and newcomers prophesied concerning Texas weather.

"He ain't a newcomer," Cowhouse informed the company. "So it must've been them Injuns he lived with. You know—"

Out of the corral set close to the Spear house two horses rocketed. Their riders were low over the saddle horns and they were gone while the U Bar men looked foolishly at each other. Lon swore furiously and led the way to their horses. And as they mounted and followed the escaping pair, it began to rain, huge drops that splashed upon their faces, at first, then sheets of water that beat upon their slickerless bodies.

"You see? You see?" Cowhouse yelled at 'Pache. "All account of your damn' predicting!"

A mile and another; five or six; then in the pouring rain they collided with a battle-line hardly seen, that stretched across a hundred yards of brush.

Flames of rifle-shots seemed drenched by the water. The reports were soggy sounds in the rain. They were six when they got to the ground and took cover, for Lethermon the deputy was killed instantly at Lon's side and fell across his saddle and was carried off by his horse. Lon crouched behind a rock and when he saw a man ahead fired accurately. The man came running with great steps toward him, then toppled. To right and left the others were shooting steadily. The rain dampened all sounds, but the U Bar line was creeping ahead. Lon went with it.

The man was the shifty-eyed Sparrow and he was dying from two gaping wounds in his body. Lon looked grimly down at him and Sparrow cursed him.

"Go on!" he gasped. "You'll — git yours—up ahead!"

The firing ceased abruptly. Pres Shotwell came up to Lon.

"We got three," he reported. "Two of Wilbur Wright's prize hands off the Hourglass and Rogers from the U Bar. More ahead, though. And from the noise, some of the steers."

"And finding Hourglass and U Bar men, both, on this drive, makes it look like a good big bunch up yonder," Lon nodded. "I hope none of your hairpins made any plans for Fourth of July. . . . Because it does look like getting your fireworks right here. Where's our cook and his cannon?"

"Having the time of his aitch-less life," Pres said, grinning. "He was the one that dropped Rogers. Said he used to kill some kind of funny animal over in India—Pathans, he called it. Said these thieves ain't in it with them."

The six mounted and rode past the scene of this preliminary fight. Lon knew that Wright and Haynes would be warned of their coming. And as they went through the slackening rain and began to see occasional straying steers, he kept the wicked little carbine ready across his arm. There were two men he wanted to kill—the only men he had ever encountered who had made him feel this cold, deadly rage. Wilbur Wright and Haynes.

They came suddenly in the brush to the ragged edge of the steer-herd and without more warning encountered the real fire of the thieves. Lon yelled and they came down from the saddles. Pres Shotwell was pinned under his dead horse and Lon helped him clear his leg. As he looked around, then, he saw a man lifting a head and saw Duke Britt rise with the .45-90.

"Ho!" the little cook yelled triumphantly. "'E's for it—and so am Hi . . . Tyke it, Boss!"

He crumpled upon the big rifle and there was no time to see if he were dead, as he seemed to be. The firing was a continuous drumming to right and left. Lon had a glimpse of Simon Mull working his left arm, that dripped blood, and of 'Pache shaking off a bullet-snagged hat. Then he went from bush to bush looking for the two men he wanted.

Out of the dark brush ahead a Winchester spat at him and he hugged the ground, watching. He shoved his carbine forward and with the slight movement of the bush fired three times.

CHAPTER VI

Once a Cameron Always a Cameron

With his shot there was a convulsive jerking behind that bush and he crawled toward it. When he could see a limp hand outflung above a carbine he ventured to go faster. And he found Varner Haynes sprawled there, shot through the head.

"And that settles the thieves on the U Bar," Lon thought, looking grimly down. "First Taylor, then Rogers and Sparrow. Now the boss-thief at our end!"

He reloaded his own carbine and went on. A man came pounding down at him, a man on a big bay. He saw Lon instantly and twisted his Winchester over. Wilbur Wright's face was not expressionless, now; it was not coldly contemptuous, even. He wore a mask of fury. Lon lifted his carbine almost slowly. He was going to kill Wright. He would kill him no matter what happened to him. And he would make no false move.

He heard Wright's firing as if it were far away. For he was concentrated on the wide chest beneath the spotted calfhide vest. A silver peso, used for a button, made a twinkling spot. He ignored the rush of the big horse at him. He squeezed the trigger softly; worked the lever; fired again.

A searing pain in his throat did not halt his third shot—before he ran to the side out of the path of the horse. When Wright came sideways, clawing at the saddle horn, he turned and drove a fourth slug into the Hourglass foreman. The bullet whipped dust from the vest under Wright's left arm. Then the horse fell and Wright was flung clear. The horse kicked. But Wright was limp and still.

All around him the battle went on—more savagely than ever, to judge by the roar of fire. A soggy step in the mud behind Lon whirled him with carbine jumping up. 'Pache Upton yelled quickly and waved from side to side.

"We got 'em dead-center!" he cried over and over, until Lon could make out the words above the firing. "Clint Bynum come out with some town men. Just in time to hit 'em on the fur side. See! Likely, ain't one left, now. Shooting's dying off."

Lon went with him, back to the horses. They mounted and rode in search of the sheriff. The wound in Lon's neck was no more than a burn. 'Pache had been hit three times but ignored his minor wounds. They went to the side to avoid the frightened steers that scattered everywhere in the brush, now. And suddenly 'Pache lifted a hand and leaned in the saddle.

"Uplinn and two Spear men. Take Uplinn and I'll gather one of the others."

Lon aimed carefully at the squat Spear owner, as Uplinn whirled his horse with sound and sight of them. He saw Uplinn come out of the saddle; saw one of the Spear riders fall to 'Pache's shot. Both fired at the third man's horse, knocked it down and riddled the puncher as he jumped clear and began to run.

They came up to the huddle at the gallop. Uplinn turned over and 'Pache rammed his Winchester down at the muddy face. Lon struck the gun aside.

"Where's Tucker?" he yelled. "Talk or we'll blow you to hell! Where'd Quince go?"

"Town—with Jube Race," Uplinn said stupidly. Then, seeming to recognize Lon, he snarled: "Go to hell!" and died.

"Come on, 'Pache," Lon said as savagely. "It's town for us, too. Let Pres and Clint and the others clean up here. I want that foxy old son of a dog, Quince

Tucker. This is one steal he won't roll his eyes and wonder about!"

He led the way and Funeral, for all his hard work of the two days past, stretched into a gallop that 'Pache's black was unable to match. Lon pulled in again and again to let the little man overtake him. And when they came in the dull afternoon to the edge of the county seat, he drew the *palomina* in to a running walk and looked at his companion.

"You look like something that just found out about the Wrath of God," he told 'Pache. "Likely, I look worse."

No word of the fight had come to town. That was plain in the manner of such men as saw the two, while they rode up and down hunting Quince Tucker. A cowboy told them, at last, that he had seen Tucker go toward his little house on the edge of town, only a few minutes before. So once more they rode toward the two-room adobe which was the buyer's office and home.

"I'll take the back," Lon said to 'Pache. "You ride up to the front door like a man with a message; not too fast."

He came up to the littered back yard of Tucker's place and swung down. As he crossed to the door he could hear Tucker speak to 'Pache in the front room. He went softly through a dirty kitchen and stood framed in the door of the front room, a small figure, spattered with mud, his clothing torn, his face stubbled with beard. The Bisley was in his hand. He spun it by the trigger guard on his forefinger.

"Shut the door, 'Pache," he said softly. "Drop the bar."

Quince Tucker whirled at the sound. Red-rimmed eyes were like windows out of which the sheer terror in his mind stared out. He made a strangling noise and lurched against a table.

"You know why I'm here, Tucker," Lon told him tonelessly.

"It wasn't me! I swear it wasn't me, Lon!" Tucker gasped. "It was Uplinn. I never even knew he'd sent Casselberry to kill you until afterward. I always been a friend to yo' folks—"

'Pache came back from barring the door and pulling down the ancient shades on the windows. He lifted his hand above Tucker's head and brought it down, flat, hard, upon the straggling hair of the buyer's skull. Tucker came to his knees. He began to crawl toward Lon, who still twirled the Bisley on the trigger guard. He was making whining, animal-like noises.

"You thought you had a scheme that was unbeatable," Lon said slowly. "Nobody would suspect old Quince Tucker of stealing from his friends. So you imported two thieves you knew, Wilbur Wright and Varner Haynes. You probably just expanded a career of stealing that Uplinn had been helping with, when you put those two on the Hourglass and the U Bar. Then you really started on a wholesale scale. But probably Earl Cameron began to have suspicions. He was nobody's fool. He must have got notions about the handiness of the Spear and things like that."

The hawkbill handle of the Bisley slapped into his palm. He stared savagely down at the writhing figure on the floor.

"So you had Wright and Armstrong kill him. Had them kill him and take his body out and drop it in a hole like a dead horse. I have killed the three men that, next to you, were responsible for the stealing and the murdering. Funny! I was the wild, weak kid of the Cameron family. Even Uncle Earl had no use for me. Told me to get off the range and put on shoes, instead of the boots Camerons wore. He was wrong about me. But I was just as wrong about myself. For I'm a Cameron, too. As good a Cameron as any of 'em. For I have done my part toward cleaning up this mess. I killed Haynes. I killed Wright. I killed Uplinn. And now—What was it they used to call my father

and Uncle Earl, in the old days before we had courts handy?"

"The Killing Camerons," little 'Pache Upton answered for Tucker. "And they ain't died out, *por Dios!* They ain't died out, yit!"

"Killing Camerons . . . " Lon repeated softly. "I'm a Killing Cameron, today, Tucker. I'm going to kill you. Maybe I wouldn't have felt so about it, if you hadn't murdered Uncle Earl. But you did murder him—and so I found out about the will he made. He had stuck to Cameron blood in that will. And so I'm doing the same thing. I'm going to kill you. No crooked lawyer will talk you out of the rope. I'm the judge and the jury and the hangman! Tucker—"

"I got the money! I got every cent we made. We only paid wages to the boys. I got it all," Tucker panted. He was at Lon's feet now, clawing at them. "It's buried in the corner yonder. Take it, Lon! But don't kill me. I'm an old man. I got kidney trouble. I can't live more'n a year or so, anyhow. Don't you have this on your hands that you killed a poor old man that couldn't fight back. Take the money. I'll give you some more. I got plenty. I—"

Lon stepped backward and Tucker fell on his face. But he was up again and crawling desperately toward Lon's feet. He was whining and gasping. Lon stared inexorably at him.

"Money won't pay for what you did. If you, yourself, had killed Uncle Earl in a fair fight, I wouldn't say a word. But you didn't. You murdered him. Then you hid him."

"I don't know a thing about it. Armstrong said he shot at him from behind and knew he killed him and run. He claimed he never knew what became of Earl. Lon! Take the money. Take all I got. You couldn't kill an old man like me—"

"No, you couldn't, Lon," a shaky voice said, behind Lon in the kitchen. "You couldn't kill him. No Cameron could."

Lon whirled. It was Earl Cameron's shadow leaning upon slim Cris Robles, whose father had been a U Bar man until his crippling years before.

"Well!" he said incredulously. And again: "Well—"

He put out a hand to his uncle's arm and Earl Cameron, misunderstanding, grinned wolfishly. His cheeks were yellow and hollow, but the fierce hazel eyes were bright and alive.

"Ain't a ghost," he reassured Lon. "Armstrong like to made one out of me, though. And I was certain—like you figured I was—that with Quince and his hired hands moving around I was going to be one, if I didn't get off somewhere. Happened, Cris here had been trailing me around. He got me into his pa's house and covered up the trail. His ma has been my doctor and now I'm good as well, again."

He came slowly into the front room and Quince Tucker cowered before him. Cris and Lon helped the little wasted figure into a chair and Earl Cameron stared at Tucker with underlip thrust out. Then he spoke to 'Pache:

"Dig up that money he's talking about. We'll pay off that short-eared jack, Jube Race, for his losses. As for Tucker—"

"You see!" Tucker cried, and his tone reflected too much of returning confidence to please Lon. "He ain't dead. You got not one speck of proof for all these lies you been telling."

"Haynes will supply all the proof we need, in a court," Lon checked him calmly. "I—sort of stretched that story. I did kill Wright and Uplinn. But we thought of all this, so we saved Haynes when he promised to testify. Saved one of the Spear boys, too. You'll die in Huntsville with that kidney complaint, Tucker.

Doan's Pills won't save you. And you can sue us for the money we're going to take out of the floor."

"Haynes? Haynes is still alive? Lon—Earl—take the money and let me get away! I can't go to the pen'. I'm too old—"

"Sit down there and write a confession that you hired the two of them. Write the whole story and sign it!'

While Tucker collapsed behind his table and 'Pache dug in the corner, Lon turned to his uncle. One lid drooped and Earl Cameron, looking at Tucker, grinned suddenly.

"I figured Grace and Clint would send for you," he said. "And—in spite of the hard words we had, son, I hoped and more—I *expected* you would do something in the Cameron line. But when Cris scouted around for me and got that thief, Taylor, I figured it wouldn't do a bit of harm for the old man to be sort of putting in his oar. So Cris carried a few messages—he writes a nice, purty hand, Cris does."

The Mexican youngster grinned at Lon:

"Sure. Learned it in school at San Antonio. But I learned to shoot on the Cameron range!"

"You do both damn' well," Lon complimented him. "I reckon you'll be riding for the U Bar, after this. Done, Tucker?"

Tucker nodded and stood weakly. Lon glanced at the paper, then scrawled his name under the signature. Cris came over to do the same. 'Pache brought over a canvas sack that jingled and rustled. Lon reached into it and took out money.

"A thousand for your getaway," he told Tucker grimly. "And if you live without blowing it, that ought to carry you through until the kidneys catch up with you."

Tucker protested but when 'Pache moved toward him, hand on pistol, he retreated toward the door and fumbled with the bar. They watched him get on his horse. He looked down the street, then rammed in the rowels and sent his horse racing off. Lon, looking also to the right, laughed for the first time in hours.

"Quince is not fond of official company, right now. Here comes Clint and the bunch; the wounded and some prisoners, it does look like. And there's Jube Race. Uncle Earl, you feel like going to talk to Jube?"

They went out of Tucker's house and toward the cavalcade that advanced slowly toward where Jube Race and Marie Dyer were standing. They came unobserved up behind Race. Clint Bynum was explaining to him, using an acid voice, what had happened.

"But Jube comes off better'n he deserves," Earl Cameron broke in. "Thanks to the Camerons—special to Lon Cameron—he is paid for his losses. Tucker had a—call it softening. He handed us over his stealings and maybe a li'l' more."

"I was a damn' old jughead," Jube Race said quickly, putting out his hand to Earl Cameron. "I never will hear the last of this, but I want to admit—"

Lon met Marie Dyer's eyes. He watched her stonily. But she moved slightly, so that they stood a trifle apart.

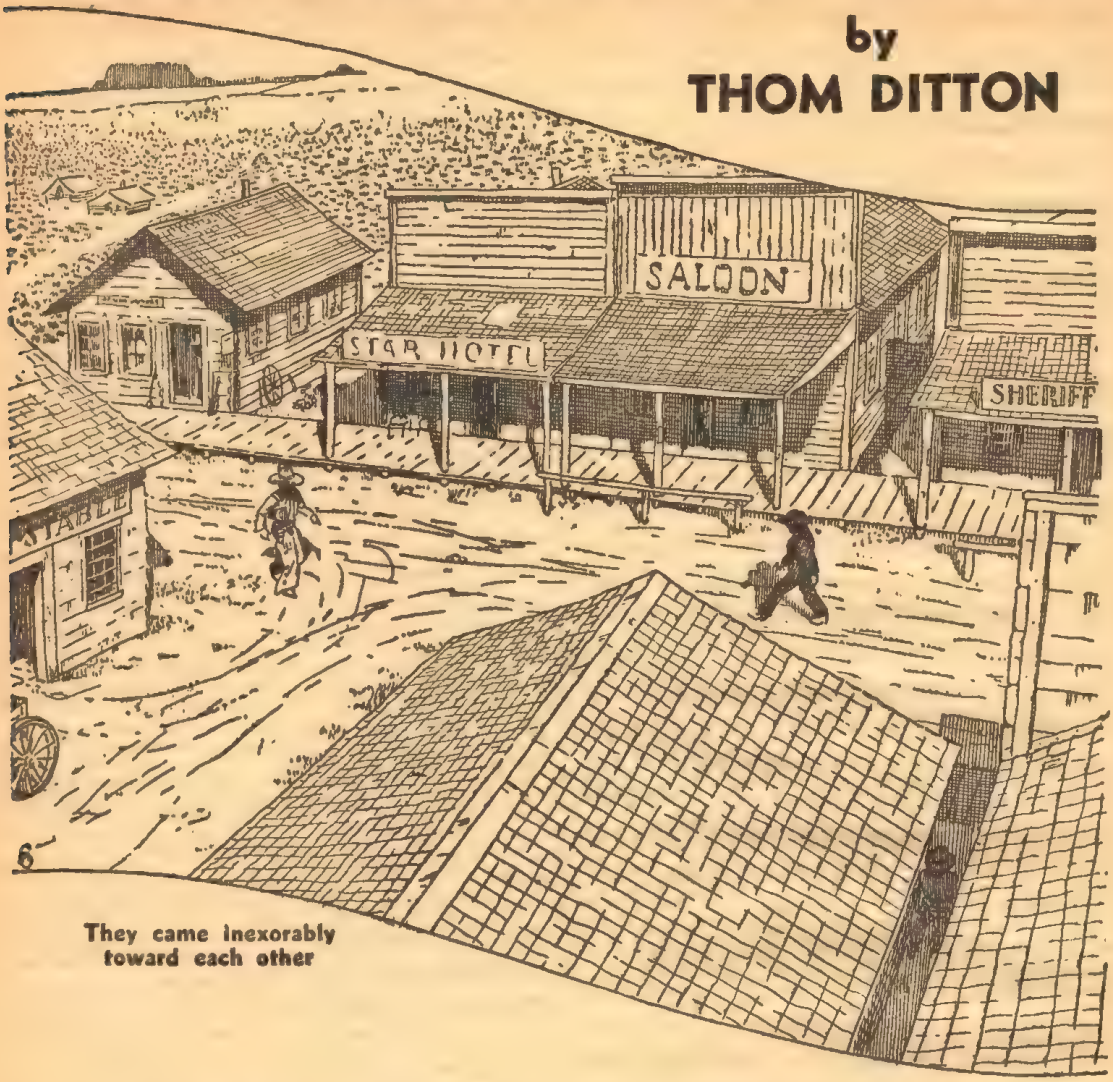
"You said it would be quite all right if I admitted to Mr. Race that I had been all wrong and you had been all right. But I find that I prefer to make the admission directly to you. If you don't mind my doing that—even though you have to look at me—consider that I'm apologizing. Wilbur Wright—"

Lon laughed and she smiled awkwardly.

"Wilbur was pretty smooth. But I'll be around pretty much, hereafter. You can say anything you want to and—I'll listen."

ONE NIGHT STAND

by
THOM DITTON



They came inexorably toward each other

To Take The Town Of Ogallala Apart A Trail-Herd Crew Had To Pay The Price

The trail riders of the Running M swirled to a noisy, thudding halt in the shadows of the sand hills fringing Ogallala. Behind them, under the star-spangled, purple sky, lay the Running M herd, six hundred miles out of the Montana range that bred them and still five hundred miles short of the Kansas buyer who was to receive them. Yet of the dusty trails already passed, and the uncertainty of those yet to be ridden, the Running M riders had no immediate thought.

The dubious lights of Ogallala beckoned them; and the doubtful melody of honky-tonk, the raucous discord of men's voices, rough in festivities. That Ogallala was a cesspool of iniquity, an infamous, violent hell-hole squatted on the prairie to prey upon cattlemen, and particularly transient cattlemen such as they, the boys of Running M knew—and bothered not a whit. They were too full of saddle uneasiness that is born of riding hard trails, to heed the presence of iniquities and violence.

Pleasure called, pleasure that had long been denied; therefore they clamored enthusiastically to the straight-backed rider at the head of the group. And from their clamoring came the eager, arrogant tone of a young voice.

"There she is, Rawhide! Ogallala, all lit up and a-waitin' for the Running M to whoop 'er!"

Rawhide Bill Travis, trail boss of the Running M, sat even straighter in his saddle. He could give the eldest of his outfit the span of fifteen years, but hard life on the trail had added nothing to a lean frame, nor had it sapped the vitality, the strength of youth from him. His face, though, was deceptive. At first glance anyone would have said that no person with a map like that was worth a row of beans in a fight. But the tanned, almost chubby cheeks that invariably were wrinkled in a good-natured grin, told of a body kept in the pink of condition. And the leather chaps, the shirt that covered his leanness, covered, also, sinews and muscles as tough as a steer's.

"Don't figger on bustin' it permanent, Larry," Rawhide said quietly. "That town jest naturally looks for trouble and gits fat on same. Likewise there's a couple interesting points you hands ain't hep to."

"The same being?" inquired the restless Larry.

"Lem Snade, owner of the Lazy S brand. This here Platte Valley country is his special pride and care, and he ain't never taken kindly to outfits feedin' cattle through his range."

"Agin same he ain't got no cause for complaint," opined Larry. "Wise the bunch up on the second cause of interest thereto."

"Ogallala's marshals ain't never wanted for publicity," Rawhide offered slowly. "Ornery killers, all of 'em. The present incumbent bein' no variation."

"And who is same?" demanded Larry arrogantly.

"Deever, former sheriff of the Twenty-mile country," advised Rawhide pleasantly.

Somebody in the group swore, and the name was repeated angrily.

"Deever!"

Rawhide Bill laughed. "A right smart shootin' gent," he said evenly. "And as sociable as a diamond-back rattler. But after swallerin' alkali for six weeks, there ain't a one of us can afford to be choosy on marshals. We got a howl comin', so let's go. But you're hereby warned that the liquor is snake bite and the games crooked—as is any that Lem Snade fingers in. Just use yore heads and stick together. Bust 'er!"

The horses sprang forward. The riders of Running M pounded into Ogallala's single street, caterwauling a medley of cries that crashed startlingly against the building fronts and flew back. Ogallala's pedestrians ducked between buildings, against walls, away from the racing ponies, away from the dozen cowhands who had gone suddenly loco; who lurched and swayed in their saddles and howled like a tribe of Apaches. They roared the length of the street, all guns barking at the stars.

"Ogallala, we're here!" The exuberant Larry lowered his aim and punctuated his cry with a shot at the barber shop window. Glass shattered noisily. A team shied, bolted along the street until the buckboard fouled a hitching post and turned over. The Running M bunch roared; their guns cracked more so that standing horses swayed aside, weaved, tugged at the lines that held them tied. Then, reaching the limit of the town, Rawhide Bill dragged his outfit out of confusion and swung them back. Halfway along the street he halted them, in front of a saloon.

"We've introduced ourselves proper," he pronounced calmly, "so git down and git in. But remember; don't be too anxious to slap leather if Deever gits around.

I want a full bunch to herd them critters on to Kansas."

"To hell with Deever," spat Larry contemptuously. "Let's drink!"

The others laughed, but there was no need to urge them to dismount. They pushed noisily through the swinging doors, with Rawhide Bill, like the father of a family, coming last. With an understanding grin he herded them to the bar and signalled for a drink.

"For the bunch," he called to the barkeep. "And keep yore rope on the bottle when Larry handles it. His paw's right heavy, and his laig's hollow."

They drank long and they drank deep, with the thirst of six dusty weeks of trail riding to be satisfied in the all-too-brief moments of a one night stand. They yelled and they bantered, making the most of the night that was theirs; then, as the thirst for liquor was appeased, the craving for play came on and singly or in pairs they drifted about the smoke-fogged room, finally settling at one or the other of the games.

Only Rawhide Bill held his ground. Back to the bar, resting on elbows that held tightly to the mahogany rails, he smiled benevolently at his bunch, his warm gray eyes following their movements watchfully. There was a keenness, a sense of alertness about him as he watched the others lose themselves in play, and it was this keenness that made him aware of an unwonted tension within the saloon, of an hostility that was mounting with the minutes.

Through eyes whose lids had suddenly narrowed in a speculative squint, he discovered men, Lem Snade's men, detaching themselves covertly from groups and posting themselves in convenient corners of the saloon. With an uncanny, almost feline facility for detecting unseen movement, he felt the edging presence of someone behind him, behind the bar.

"It'll be just too bad if yore boys start anything," a leering voice said.

Rawhide did not move, did not change the character of his pose. He knew without looking that it was Lem Snade who spoke. He knew, too, that Snade was glaring at him out of rheumy, baleful eyes, and that his thumbs were hitched in his belt so that the fingers of each hand stretched down to touch the butts of a pair of six-guns.

Rawhide knew these things because he knew Snade, even as he knew, from covert signals being passed through the saloon, that Snade was going to brace him. Yet

"I Aim To Drill You!"

Rawhide did not move; he only spoke, quietly, with an aggravating slowness.

"I reckon Runnin' M can hold its end up, Snade."

Snade's laugh had a snarl in it. "It'll be doin' that right soon, Travis—without its trail boss. I've warned you for the last time about herdin' yore beef through the Platte Valley country!"

"You ain't," asked Rawhide, with intense calmness, "aimin' to throw down on me from behind?"

Snade laughed that snarling laugh again, and his thumbs loosened themselves from his belt.

"You can meet up with my face any time you have a mind to. But I'm warnin' you, Travis. Slap leather when you do. I aim to drill you!"

"I just wanted to git things straight—that's all."

Rawhide stayed motionless, but his

glance played along the walls, and over the floor. He saw there was a quiet shifting of the house men from the centers of play, and through the hum and crackle of argumentative voices he heard the arrogant Larry cursing angrily.

"One—off the top this time, mister. I'm on to yore dealin'."

Rawhide grinned.

"I'm turnin', Snade, when the boys is finished their play. Right soon, I expect." Then the doors squeaked open and a tall fellow came through them casually and approached the bar.

There was no mistaking the man. The macabre thinness, the egg-shaped head, the small flat ears made him all too plain. This was Deever the killer, the town marshal, the law of Ogallala, Lem Snade's law. Deever's march to the bar was unhurried, not without swagger, and his glance through the room was cynical, malevolent. When, presently, that glance, moving quickly, fell upon Rawhide, it stopped and froze as though the pale gray face, the narrow nose and tight, drooping lips had suddenly become atrophied, incapable of movement.

Rawhide's grin broadened as he found himself meeting the stare from Deever's unwinking, narrowed snake-like eyes, but he made no move other than to slightly incline his head in recognition.

Deever approached closer, and spoke softly.

"Your boys, Travis?"

"The same. Each and all," agreed Rawhide Bill.

Deever considered a minute, while his long fingers hiked the brace of guns that he carried.

"We'll say twelve dollars for damages to the buckboard, and eighteen for the window your bunch shot out—cash money."

"Agreeable to half the same," replied Rawhide. "We figgered to pay for our fun. I'll leave it with the barkeep, after I brace your boss."

The marshal watched over Rawhide's shoulder, but he said nothing. Then he turned to leave.

"Snade aims to drill me. Ain't you stayin' for the show?" inquired Rawhide pleasantly.

"Sorry," said Deever, and tapped his star. "You'll understand why." Then he bowed slightly and left the room in long, catlike strides.

Snade said: "I'm waitin', Travis, and I'm plumb impatient."

Over at the poker table the furious Larry was cursing violently again.

"I'm watchin' yore fingers, mister dealer. From the top or . . . ." A significant slap, as of hand on leather, completed the threat.

Rawhide smiled, nodded gently. "Soon, right soon, Snade," he whispered. "The boys are about through." Another curse from Larry followed the statement, and Rawhide stiffened imperceptibly, his warm gray eyes growing suddenly hard. Then the crashing of an upturned table and the clatter of scattered chips filled the saloon and started a sudden movement of Running M toward Larry. At that moment Rawhide sidestepped swiftly and ripped out a warning:

"Draw, Snade! I'm turnin'!"

There came the resounding smack of a hard hand meeting leather, and, lightning quick, Rawhide pivoted, snapped his Colt from its holster. Two guns roared, but there was a split second of difference between their sounds. Snade's was late; actually his gun barked from a lifeless hand.

Rawhide slid quickly to the end of the bar, then covered a barkeep, whose hands had made a furtive movement out of sight. "Hit for the ponies," he called out sharply to his bunch. "You've had yore fun. Now git!" The last of his words were smothered by gun-roar, and the un-

holy crashing of splintering glass as Rawhide, with methodical calmness, sniped off the drop lamps that until now had lighted the saloon.

"Back out, boys," ordered Rawhide again. "And throw down on the first of these coyotes who moves."

The Running M outfit slithered toward the door, and another roar of sound sent a shivering echo against the walls of the room as Colts cracked out from all sides and corners. Running M replied in kind, then backed through the doors while Rawhide held his place at the end of the bar, poised like a panther. But when the last of his men had gone he sprang after them and swung into the saddle, then galloped behind them down a street that had suddenly gone mad.

A terrific blast, like the cumulative crash of all the six-guns in the world, tore loose from the fronts, the windows, the alleys of the single street as Snade men shredded the night with their lead. The darkness was interrupted, weirdly at times, by the stabbing continuity of red and purply muzzle fire from belching Colts. The night was alive with riotous sound, and the sooty stench of burned powder polluted the prairie night wind. Now, under crazy patterns of light and flame and the suddenly brightened lights from the building fronts, the Running M outfit fled the town, galloping toward the prairie shadows while the Snade men filled the air with angry shouts and whining bullets that kicked up furious spurts of dust as they fell short.

Rawhide lagged a bit to satisfy himself there was no actual pursuit, then laying his quirt across the rump of his plunging pony, he followed his bunch into the shelter of the deep shadows beyond the end of town. They halted there, breathing hard, while the ponies panted and trembled. Behind them the firing ceased, and the shouts died down to nothingness.

A small silence descended on Running M, broken only by the snap of six-gun loading gates and the snick of fresh cartridges being slipped home.

"A right hospitable town," Rawhide reflected at last. "But you hands got no squawk. I warned you."

"No squawk a-tall, boss," a voice answered from the shadows. "We seen our fun and we had it. Who was the hombre you threw down on?"

"Snade," replied Rawhide gently. "He was aimin' to drygulch me, and his frozen-faced marshal knew it. I owe you a risin' vote of thanks, Larry, for the ruckus you kicked up. It evened things a mite."

Somebody else said: "Larry ain't here, Rawhide."

Rawhide swore softly, and sat straight-backed. "Where'd that ornery young cuss git away from the parade?"

"He piled out ahead," one of the bunch offered. "I heerd him yellin' about lettin' the air out of that snake-eyed marshal."

Rawhide spat out a sharp, bitter oath.

"They'll bury him tomorrow if he whips guns with Deever. The marshal'll admire to hang him, anyway. To even up for Snade!"

"Let's go back and git him," suggested another of the trail crew.

Rawhide shook his head. "You're like Larry, Cheyenne. The brains in your addled head ain't a fittin' size for yore guts. We're jest naturally on the outside of Ogallala from now on."

Talk fell flat, and in the darkness Running M waited for a decision from Rawhide Bill. Presently it came: "Hit back to camp, boys. I'm going to git Larry."

"Hell, Rawhide! That's plumb loco! You can't brace the town single!"

"I don't aim to," said Rawhide. "Cheyenne, you take over and git the herd movin' over the trail in the mornin'. Larry and me'll catch up somewhere along the line."

"It ain't right you should do it," ob-

jected Cheyenne. "Take a couple of the boys, anyway."

A hard edge slipped into Rawhide's voice. "I'm goin' alone. Git movin'."

There was a little wait, a moment of tense quiet. Then the hands got under way. Rawhide turned and rode slowly from the shadows, back into town.

He went straight to the saloon. With a calm, studied deliberation he hitched his horse to the rail, then loosened the Colt in his holster and marched through the doors. A barkeep greeted him:

"You alone, Travis?"

Rawhide threw a sidelong glance at the play tables, saw that Snade men were watching him intently. He nodded to the barkeep. "My outfit aims to pay for its fun. Tote up the damages for the lamps and the glassware."

The barkeep whistled softly.

"You never was a one to want for nerve, Rawhide," he said admiringly. "Snade ain't worried none about the damages. We're a-buryin' him in the mornin'."

"I allowed you would be," admitted Rawhide. "The grave ain't so far from the cradle for the likes of him."

"Not less'n you're faster'n lightnin' on the draw," answered the barkeep. "The marshal's got yore man. Shot the horse from under him in an alley, then jugged him. He's hangin' him tomorrer, after the buryin'."

"What charge?" asked Rawhide, the question being purely conversational. He already knew the answer.

"Snade," the barkeep informed him. "Deever ain't the one to admit that the big feller was braced fair, and with the odds in his favor. Not when he's getting ready to take over."

"Snade had me covered long before I touched leather," explained Rawhide simply. "He was fixin' to gulch me."

The barkeep nodded. " I seen his play. So did Deever, but the marshal ain't allowin' a hombre could move fast enough to call it. He claims yore outfit gulched Snade, and your puncher is treadin' air for it, accordin'."

Rawhide ran a speculative eye around the saloon, then along the bar. "Ogallala's kind of justice?" he asked dryly.

"Deever's," corrected the barkeep. "He's the law here an' nobody dares to cross him less'n they don't want to remain animated. Ogallala's had some killers in its time, but Deever's about as cold as they come. You'd be plumb well advised to hit the trail, Rawhide. You can't meet the marshal even. Nobody can!"

"I'm thankin' you right kindly for the advice," said Rawhide Bill. "But I don't aim to take it. I came back for my puncher."

The barkeep's eyes quickened with interest. "You're either loco, or plumb stubborn, Rawhide. The marshal'll git you like this!" He snapped his fingers to illustrate the emphasis.

"I reckon," asked Rawhide mildly, "there'll be no mournin' if the cards come out the other way?"

"No more'n what might resemble a Fourth of July jamboree," the barkeep hastened to explain.

"That bein' the case I won't reckon to meet up with the trouble after I git my puncher."

The barkeep grinned. The grin froze when the tall, stiff body of a man came through the doors and glided to the bar. Deever, malevolent, sinister, tapped Rawhide on the shoulder.

"I saw you come back."

Rawhide's gray eyes met the marshal's with a faint, almost humorous squint.

"Yore job, I'd offer to guess. It ain't any secret that I came for my puncher. Have a drink?"

"Never take it," said Deever. "Make it a smoke."

Rawhide beckoned to the barkeep, told him to put out the cigars. The marshal

took one, bit off the end, his gaze fixing itself narrowly on the trail boss without the slightest twitch of a lid. Then he lit the cigar, and a pair of cold, black eyes looked across the flame of the match with the venomous stare of a snake.

"Your puncher hangs at high noon," he said at last. "You may attend to him at ten for the last will and testament thereof. And git out of town by eleven sharp, or answer to me without warnin' or recourse whatsoever."

There was a brief moment when both men stood eye to eye, the one holding the colorful perspective, the healthy open nature of the range; the other reflecting the cold, menacing trademark of a killer.

"I take it we slap leather at eleven pronto, without warning or added palaver," interpreted Rawhide.

Deever's reply contained a contemptuous inflection. "I spoke plain, and I usually mean what I say."

"No questions," said the imperturbable Rawhide. "Jest wanted to git things straight, that's all."

Deever stared hard, coldly, as though trying to destroy Rawhide with the power of his eyes. Then, turning abruptly, he went from the place. There was an air of affability about the barkeep as he came back to Rawhide.

"So you called the marshal's play? You aim to brace him even?"

Rawhide's reply was soft-spoken. "Nothin' but."

"There ain't a man in the country that's got him hipped. His hand's faster'n a streak of lightnin' that's greased to go somewhere. You're entitled to odds."

Rawhide laughed grimly.

"Thanks for the warnin', but it'll have to be eleven sharp, face up. Is the stable still in business? I'll need a horse for my boy. I aim to guess the marshal'll have his saddle?"

The barkeep nodded.

"His pickin's. You want a room for the night?"

"I aim to stay," declared Rawhide tersely.

The sun climbed, and the day grew hot. It was nearing ten when Rawhide, moving with the assurance of one following a routine well known to him, walked into the stable. A hostler, slouching in behind, surveyed the trail boss with an inquisitive eye.

Rawhide Meets The Killer

"I was in the saloon last night," he commented. "You still figger to sit in the game with Deever?"

Rawhide nodded.

"He's holdin' a puncher of mine. Reckon I've got to see his hand."

The hostler shook his head. "Yo're loco to play yore chips against a stacked deck. Deever's plumb industrious with his shootin' and it'll be right unfortunate for you to be in town at eleven."

Rawhide's gray eyes moved up and down the other in a sort of quizzical appraisal, then set themselves in a half humorous squint.

"I braced Snade," he said wonderingly, "and Snade's town is plumb overheated 'cause Snade's marshal is gittin' his chance to brace me. What's the answer?"

"The marshal ain't liked, perfessionally nor socially," the hostler replied. "He's quicker'n hell on the draw, and he likes killin'."

"That's what I hear." Rawhide's glance went around the stable, then came back to the hostler. "I want a horse for my puncher to ride."

"Ten dollars deposit for the pick of the stable," stated the hostler quickly. "Same reverts to me if you stub yore toe. Business has been good thataway since Deever is marshal."

"Fifty dollars cash money, now, for that roan," said Rawhide firmly. "Same to be groomed and fed by eleven."

The hostler shrugged his shoulders and accepted.

"Yuh're sure a cool one," he offered. "Luck!"

"Thanks."

Rawhide left the stable and walked diagonally, unhurriedly across to the jail office. Deever was there, lolling in a chair. A peculiar something flickered in the cold, snaky eyes that fastened themselves instantly on Rawhide. The marshal looked at his watch.

"Ten on the stroke. You're punctual, Travis, but I changed my mind about lettin' you see that puncher. Same ain't necessary. You still got an hour to hit it out of town."

"I stated my intentions in the saloon. I ain't seen any reason to hedge," informed Rawhide. "Where'll you be at eleven?"

Deever's preternatural face remained immobile, uncompromising. "I leave here at a minute to. You aimin' to stay?"

Rawhide considered the question thoughtfully. "Larry's a number one hand," he said eventually. "And I need him. Consequence is I stay 'til I git him."

Deever's eyes returned to his watch, and he nodded. "I am," he replied through those cruel, thin lips, "a great hand at gittin' things straight myself, and I never warn twice. Your herd in good hands?"

Rawhide nodded acquiescence. "I'll be outside the stable across the street. Leave yore keys here."

Deever laid his watch on his desk, and on his deathly face the rigidness, the everlasting stoniness of his expression, changed into something approaching a smile.

"Make disposition of your personal effects with the barkeep at the saloon. The county coroner does a right nice job of buryin', and plumb reasonable. Headstones extra."

"I'll remember that," replied Rawhide, closing the door softly behind him.

Eyes came up quickly as Rawhide reentered the saloon; then covert glances flew back and forth. There were no games in progress. Play, interrupted by the excitement caused by Rawhide's earlier appearance, had not been resumed. Talk died down to a murmur, but the room was tense, electric, as Rawhide's lean, straight figure walked to the bar.

"You're stayin' to brace him, then?" asked the barkeep with a quick glance to the clock.

Rawhide nodded, amused, then called for a drink. A thin-faced, hard-bitten cowboy left the tables and came over to the bar. "If," he advised seriously, "it's to be a face to face affair—you're already daid an' in yore grave. Deever's been marshal in some right coarse towns and he's still animated. Likewise he can shoot out the ace of diamonds at fifty paces. A man takes an awful chance crossing up with him."

"Them as lives by the gun is more'n apt to die by the same," soliloquized Rawhide.

"Spoken like a true scholar," said the puncher, but his thin face reflected doubt that Deever would die by the gun. "I'd admire to buy you a drink."

The barkeep pushed the bottle toward Rawhide. "He's still in the office, Travis. You don't hafta meet him level."

"How else would I do it?" queried Rawhide.

"Spot him from the alley alongside the jail," answered the other, no longer shading his meaning. "When he leaves his office, he'll turn and walk this way. Bust 'im then, like he'd do to you, without recourse or further words."

"That ain't my way of playing a hand, barkeep."

The barkeep shrugged, snorted derisively. "Yuh're a damn fool, Rawhide."

There was no immediate answer; only a squinting smile from gray eyes that had grown suddenly hard.

Time dragged. The saloon clock ticked off the gaunt seconds. Outside, the sun was still climbing and through the window the barkeep watched the solitary, lean, straight-backed figure walk from the bright sunlight into the shade of the stable. The barkeep nodded his head approvingly. "He's putting the sun in the marshal's eyes," he said to the thin-faced puncher. Then he looked at the clock. It wanted five minutes to eleven.

"Better fan," Rawhide warned the hostler. "There's lead coming this way right soon." His glance went calmly across to the jail. He paused a bit, waiting for a few breathless minutes to move themselves inexorably across the face of eternity. Then Deever walked from his office to the dust outside. He turned and the sun struck him full in the face. But the cold, unblinking eyes of the marshal ignored the sudden change of light, and searched venomously across the street.

Rawhide stepped forward and Deever's arm dropped. Rawhide lunged aside, and the slap of his own hand against his gun butt split the breathless silence of the street. There were no wasted motions; no movements that had not to do with the grim business at hand. A brace of guns flew from their respective holsters, and a pair of shots exploded together.

Rawhide swayed, and a trickle of red started down from beneath his hat. But he caught and steadied himself, and returned his attention to Deever. The marshal had tripped and fallen, was lying in the dust, the life oozing from him. Rawhide walked forward and stood over Deever. "Sorry," he said apologetically. "I had nothin' against you personal."

"No regrets. Git your puncher and ride out of here," the marshal snapped weakly. "And tell those coyotes at the saloon that Deever's dead."

Deever's cruel, tight-lipped mouth sagged a bit. His eyes glazed. But they remained as in life, cold, unsquinting, staring.

Rawhide took off his hat, not in any gesture of reverence, but to inspect the damage from the marshal's bullet. "I offered to guess them eyes of yore'n would kill you, Deever," he said softly. "You didn't know enough to squint in the sun." Then, conscious that he had completed a hard chore, he walked straight into the jail office. "That's fun a-plenty for a one night stand," he mused as he picked up the key to the cells.

HELL'S

"Free," she sobbed, "Free to belt on that gun and carry on the killings my father knew you would!"

A COMPLETE NOVEL

by

JAMES P. OLSEN

The Devil's Basin country lay hot, baked and cracking. It stretched for miles that were endless, reaching with cacti, and mesquite-studded talons toward the Mirage Mountains that spooked up, then faded, in the east.

The town of Bonestalk was fit honor to the Devil's Basin range. It lay gray as dry sage, listless, drooping, forlorn. But never somnolent! Too many things had happened along the one short street. Warped clapboards had sent the echoes of guns tumbling back into the ears of victor

HERITAGE

Inherited From An Outlaw He Held In His Hand The Power To Make Or Break That Range Country. The Eyes Of A Woman And The Speed Of His Gun Gave Him The Answer

and the dead. To this place Steve Stinett came because of a letter from a lawyer named Jervan Merns—and because there was bitterness in his heart.

Steve looked up at the sign across the walk, and something within him did a double flip. The building that bore the sign was a place of hope, and a place of hopes despoiled. King Landry's throne was here. In this gray building was the bank, the land and cattle. In Montana three months ago King Landry's daughter had laughed in Steve Stinett's face.

"Marry you?" she'd flung at him. "And settle down with nothing but the bare necessities of life on this little unstocked spread? Don't you know my father is rich? He owns a bank, owns a whole county. I can travel, dress well, meet people. You have nothing to offer but yourself."

Well, he himself had not been enough. There was gall in that. Gall which made him seize the one-in-a-million trick of fate in the form of a lawyer's letter which had set him riding south. And because he was riding toward the vague promise of trouble, the gunman, Fog Altrup, had ridden with him.

Steve tore his eyes from King Landry's bank and with Altrup at his heels, went on to the end of the block. There he found a blistered sign, a door, and Attorney Jervan Merns. Instantly, he was alive to a current of animosity he could hardly conceal. The thin face, the cold, appraising, ferret manner of the man rubbed Steve wrong. Fog Altrup bristled none the less, and let his hand drop to the worn walnut butt of the gun he wore in open hostility to any who might care to say that he must take it off.

"Wasn't your father known as Trey Stinett?" Merns asked. "Didn't he get his name because he was—no offense—a gunman, and could shoot the spots out of a trey playing card and never miss?"

"You've got Trey Stinett's brand read right," Steve assented. "And Trey was my dad."

"Trey Stinett once rode with an outlaw infamously known as Red Colt, did he not?" Merns pursued.

"He did," Steve replied.

"Well, Red Colt's dead. And there's no question," Jervan Merns said, "you are the heir to half his ranch—rather half heir to the whole thing. As such, I must tell you where you stand." He leaned back, letting his coat fall apart. The butt of a shoulder-holstered gun was let to view. Merns moved things on his dusty desk, aimlessly.

"The ranch is named the Six-Gun," he began. "I am afraid—" he smiled bleakly —"the co-inheritor will be more of a hindrance than a help. Anyhow, Red Colt wanted you to have half, because he believed a son of Trey Stinett could carry on his fight."

He looked for words from the dark, slender cowman—but no words came. Steve was listening now. Later, if called for, the words might be forthcoming. Now, he merely shrugged and said, "Get on, man."

"Hmmm. Well, if you tuck your tail and quit the bunch, if you sell the place to the opposition, what money you get goes to a third party. You've got to fight it out —and it's a fight! You've got to win, for any other way you go, you lose!"

"And who is this third party who gets the money or the ranch if we lose out "

Jervan Merns grunted, "Nuh-uh. That's something I am not allowed to tell."

"All right," Steve was undisturbed. "Then who is it that's spoiling for a fight?"

"King Landry!" Merns exclaimed.

A cold flush was Steve's sensation. And then a feeling of grim, hard satisfaction. He commenced to laugh, while Merns looked on askance. Fog Altrup shot his brows and scratched his head. The ways of Steve were beyond giving Fog surprises any more.

Steve laughed on. It was like something one read about, and snorted in disgust that in real life it could not be. He had been called, given share in half a kingdom, and told to battle it out with the father of the girl who'd told him he hadn't enough to offer her.

He cast the thought aside.

"King Landry—no man, is bullet-proof," he growled.

"No man—is—right," Merns answered meaningly.

"Not even King Landry. And now, if you'll tell me who my partner is at Six-Gun Ranch, I'll be getting on my way."

Jervan Merns poked his little finger into his ear, withdrew and inspected the tip of it. "Now comes the hell of it," he dispassionately said.

"Red Colt had a daughter, Alice Colt. She's there for looks, for temper, for spite. She'll fight you, too. She's in love with Art Landry, King Landry's son, and wants to sell to King Landry, anyhow." The look he passed at Steve was very keen.

Steve yawned, arose, stretched and said: "You tell this unknown third man that he'll *never* get that ranch."

CHAPTER II
A Woman to Fight

Steve Stinett and Fog Altrup gathered small, yet important details here and there, and then struck out cross the Devil's Basin range. Their gleanings all bore the chaff of King Landry. He either owned outright, or had leases on every cow outfit, big and small, Devil's Basin contained. All save one—The Six-Gun Ranch.

It was fitting, Steve Stinett opined, Red Colt should choose such an iron; the outline of a six-gun that adorned the hides of his beeves was symbolic of Red Colt. Yes, and Trey Stinett.

They struck off southward, under a sun that was merciless as the land itself. Lizards and horned toads panted in the sun; the growth was spiny, cruel. "Like the men we'll likely lock our horns with before we booger down," Fog Altrup said.

Steve shrugged. "It ain't men that worries me. I'm wondering about this girl of Colt's. If she holds part of the ranch, she ain't going to forgive me for taking the other half. If she's in love with King Landry's son, she'll hate it all—"

"The hell!" Fog Altrup exclaimed. "I'm worryin' more about that filly that you herded around last season. She's King's offspring." He looked at Steve, opened his mouth, then shut it trappishly. And a slow, keen look of understanding overspread Fog Altrup's face.

"I think," he muttered to himself, "I can begin to see some things."

A dozen or more miles lay behind them when they reached the buildings of Six-Gun Ranch. It certainly was not a prepossessing place. A box-like, gray frame house; a dingy bunkhouse that one knew would smell of stale blankets, dirty socks and sweat; corrals, a sun-blistered stable. All set down on a flat, baked and dusty as they ever came to be.

In the heated silence of early afternoon, the drone of flies was clearly audible. The place seemed deserted. Save for a saddled horse standing restless beside the house, there was no sign of life. In the mind of each of the riders flashed a vision of tumbling waters, whispering pines, of mountains, of parks and meadows lush with grass.

"Oh, hell!" Steve wearily declaimed.

"It's that, and likely some more," Fog hastened to agree. They both sensed an animosity to come; an ominous foreboding that set them at unrest. As one, they both swung down.

As they approached the side door, the rumble of voices reached their ears. Wondering why he had come—and knowing why, deep in his heart—Steve raised a heavy hand and struck the door. The drone of voices ceased. Sound of rapid footsteps, the screen swung back. Fog Altrup groaned, "Oh, Gawd!" and Steve removed his dusty hat.

The girl was buxom; she was young. Her full red lips were sensuous, her eyes sharp, and her crown was a glory of hair that was fiery red. Her sharp eyes whipped here, there, noting each detail of the dress of this stranger pair; went past them to their saddles, and studied the wild rose design, the cinches . . .

"You're Steve Stinett!" she cried, making accusation of the words. "You come from up north—to try to run things like

Red Colt thought you would. Your being here—hell, what good are prayers? I always get exactly opposite."

The injury, woman-dealt, leaving a scar that would never heal, was yet too fresh in Steve's mind and heart. His eyelids became tiny slits through which the yellow light gleamed frightfully. The urge to fight, to show them all the way to hell, boiled up inside of him.

"You're Alice Colt," Steve stated, no appreciable pleasure apparent in his tone. "I'm Steve Stinett. It was no will of mine that brought me here."

"Then why come?" she heatedly demanded, her voluptuous form still barring the way inside.

"You wouldn't understand," he enigmatically replied.

"And now, if you'll stand aside, Fog Altrup and me will move our stuff inside."

"The hell you preach!"

The man who spoke was blond, weak-mouthed, yet with a chin that denoted stubbornness. He thrust Alice Colt aside and confronted Steve. "I'm Art Landry," he informed Steve. "And I heard the name of Fog Altrup. Are you—"

"Yeah," Fog growled. "I thought mebbe this country southwest would have forgotten me by now."

This was news to Steve. He'd never known Fog Altrup had been a damned name in the Southwest. Fog was not the sort who mentioned things, and Steve was not the type of man who'd ask.

"You'll be forgotten," Art Landry snarled. "Like all your kind should be forgotten: when you're dead." Art Landry's right hand drooped toward his gun. Fog shook his head.

"Steve, I read his brand. He wants to be a bad man, a gunfighter, a killer. He's the kind that bad men fatten their reps on, y'know." Fog sniffed his scorn.

"And why," Steve sought peace of a temporary sort, "do I preach hell when I mention coming in to what is partly mine?"

"Think you're going to live in the house with Alice?" Art Landry roared. "Think I'll stand by and see you alone with her. Ha—"

Steve exploded. Be damned to them. To hell with them. His was a patient nature breaking bounds. His right hand speared forth, twisted in the gaudy neckscarf Landry wore; his left fist was a driving weapon that crunched on Art Landry's chin. He held the blond, would-be bad-man's sagging form erect and his left fist drove again and again to smash the bloody face.

Alice Colt was screaming, her eyes wide with terror. A pair of sleepy-eyed punchers, rubbing their eyes, came bolting from the bunkhouse. The soporific quality of the day was riven wide.

Art Landry's head lolled, rolled this way and that. Steve was striking with his open palm now—but devastating blows nonetheless. Blood trickled from Landry's mouth and nose and his eyes were closed. Each resounding smack Steve dealt was a blow at Lois; a blow in protest of the things in Devil's Basin that stood for her laughing at him as she had. His pent emotions were un-damned, and all the fight came out.

He thrust Landry away, saw him stagger and collapse, and turned to face the men who came running from the bunkhouse. The almost albino man in the front gestured backward to the cadaverous-featured one at his heels, then opened his mouth to speak. He closed it, slowly.

Steve stood and stared him down. The man hunched his shoulders, as one who suffers cold, or chill of fear. Yet he was not less than a hard case himself. He could not fathom the expression in the tawny eyes, nor the deep lines in Steve's face.

The man at his back jerked his head uneasily, and fastened his own gaze on the form of Fog Altrup. Altrup slowly shook

his head. "If it's guns you're figgering on, I just wouldn't try," he softly, menacingly adjured. The other took him at his word, but in a manner that subtly threatened there'd be an answer later on.

"All right. Now that the rush is over, what are you aiming to do?" Steve stood flat-footed, facing the cotton-haired man.

"What are *you* going to do?" the other roared. "I'm Forty-Four Grilt, the foreman here. I—"

"You *was* the foreman here," Steve tartly advised. "I want you to meet Fog Altrup, the new foreman. If you want to stay on as a hand, why, that is fine with me. Otherwise, pack your sack and roll your tail."

Grilt looked at Alice Colt, who raised her head but did not rise from her kneeling position beside Art Landry, who was moaning feebly in returning consciousness.

"It'll be the last you'll get of days for a spell to come."

Aided by Alice Colt, Art Landry had gained his feet. Steve stepped near. "You still think you can chase me off a place that's partly mine?" Steve demanded dispassionately.

No words came. Landry just stood and glared with bloodshot eyes. It was the girl who bristled back.

"You've taken hold of something you'll be proud to turn loose of," she cried. "My father held this place by guns, by rustling, by every dirty trick he and your own father ever learned on the outlaw trail. I'm willing to see my share go to anyone, if King Landry gets the land. What right have you—"

"I told you you'd never understand," Steve harshly drawled.

"The place I run, the outfits I've had

"You'll Smell Gunsmoke!"

"It's true, damn it!" she spat. "He owns half the Six-Gun, Grilt, and has the say of the way it runs. Now he does—" favoring Steve with a venomous look he affected to ignore. "I'm thinking he and his Fog Altrup gunman will find our brand of—"

"Nobody ask you about your brand of gunfight hell, or anything," Steve jeered, goading her until she gnashed her teeth.

Grilt looked at his partner. "Well, Hatran?"

Hatran shrugged, and the ghost of a sneering smile flicked across his skull-like face. "I'm with you for keeping on the job, things being as they are." His voice matched his looks, and Steve and Fog knew that here was a man to be watched when a back was turned his way.

"Fine. You can go back and finish your snooze," Steve curtly dismissed the pair.

under lease, have been stolen blind by Red Colt," Landry made bold to speak through puffy lips. "By God, now that he's dead, you aren't going to carry on the job."

"Not if it takes rustling, I won't," Steve readily agreed.

"Then what are you going to do here?" Landry cried.

"Meaning," said Steve, "we can't beat you and King Landry unless we go on the rustle and stir leaves on the owlhoot trail. Meaning, by the way you said the words, you're too big for me to fight on the top of the deck.

"How do you know I ain't?" Steve's voice rose. "How do you know I can't take away your entire land, your money—everything." He did not realize he had unconsciously quoted part of Lois' words, that day by the stream when the meadow spread below.

"You'll smell gunsmoke, fool!" Landry croaked, turning away.

Steve and Fog exchanged glances. Both laughed raucously.

CHAPTER III
Law of the Pack

The roll of the basin was intensified by the heat that waved before Steve's eyes. He lifted his hat,flipped perspiration from his forehead with crooked forefinger and made a wry face at Fog Altrup. Wordless, they dropped into an arroyo and eventually came out where the dispirited, drooping cottonwood trees marked the line of Cicada Creek.

In the heated forenoon, the scrape of their horse's hooves on the heated rocks rang loud. Flies and bugs droned above hot pools of brackish, green-scummed water. A few sad, disheartened willows bent toward these futile drinking spots.

The pair dismounted and sought doubtful shade. Steve fashioned a cigarette, sighed, looked at Fog. Fog, hunched on his heels, looked disgusted. "Three days," he complained. "Not a sign of trouble. Yet, dammit! I can feel trouble in the air."

"It looks like there'd been trouble before," Steve agreed. He thought back over the past days. In his mind's eye he counted the steers he and Fog had encountered, that wore doubtful, blotched brands. The Big A of Art Landry—who really only ran the ranch for his father, King, had been made part of the butt of a big Six-Gun. Other brands, held by small outfits also under the Landry thumb, had likewise been changed.

"Red Colt," Steve reckoned whimsically, "didn't give a damn—now you think he did?"

"But he stayed on top," Fog Altrup pointed out, "when all the others was falling to Landry's grab."

"It's a poor way to stay," Steve musingly allowed.

"Yet you're sticking with what he gobbled," Fog reminded.

"Yeah. But not gobbling any more."

"Changing the subject—you notice the red-head is sort of unbending," Fog Altrup said. He picked up a small stone and flipped it into a stinking pool.

"There's something back of it. She's trying new ways, since being hostile failed to work," Steve grunted. "You never want to see what you *think* you see behind a woman's eyes."

"Oh," Fog's lips formed the word. "So you've learned that lesson, *too*."

"Well," Steve passed this up, "we've seen about all. We know that Six-Gun ain't worth half what King Landry wants to pay for it. We know that the range is burnt, the water near gone, and a dry fall and winter on our heels. If it wasn't for this mysterious third party business, I'd say sell out, and go back north where we belong."

"I don't belong there," Fog mumbled, his face moody, his eyes gaining a far-off look. "This is my kind of country, and I'd rather stay down here. And somehow, Steve, I got a notion that I will."

"Don't you start," Steve reprimanded. He arose, flipped his cigarette away, took a step toward the horses.

The spanking report of a rifle lay flat on the heated air. Maddened, whining hellishly, a bullet wailed its wild threat into the ringing stillness. Steve ducked instinctively, and heard the flat chunk of sound as the missile ground into a tree across the creek.

"Fan him, the son!" Fog Altrup snarled, ducking toward a breast-high cut-bank to his left. Steve leaped to the right, spat a curse at the hidden marksman as a bullet screamed off a rock, and gained the shelter of a bend that bore abruptly toward the firepoint of the shots.

He worked carefully, silently, while the sun drew sweat out of his body and through his shirt. His face was flat, emotionless, and the wise would have read a lot of the killer there. The killer-kind, however, who strike only when aroused, or have been forced with an excuse.

Cautiously, Steve thrust his head above the bank. A jumble of wild plum bushes matted the way before him. Slowly, careful to make no attracting, sudden move, he turned his head this way and that. Of the man in the bushes, of Fog Altrup, there was no sign.

His eyes turned upward, and were somehow drawn to the hornet's nest swung from a heavy branch of a wild plum tree. And even as he looked, he heard a croaking laugh that came from unseen Fog Altrup's throat. A six-gun disturbed the quietude and the hanging hornet's home swayed and jerked.

Bullet-like, maddened, the winged darts shot forth in endless stream. Another bullet clipped the nest from the limb and spilled it to the ground. A vicious hum, like the gathering of a cyclone far away, sounded as the hornets zoomed through the bush.

The thicket agitated violently, parted. A man, arms flailing about him, ran cursing toward the creek. Fog Altrup, moving hastily himself, a thin, mean grin spreading his face, ran around the bushes from the opposite side. Together, he and Steve went after the fleeing man.

He was in one of the pools in the creek bed, wallowing in the sour mud, groaning his complaints. His groaning ceased as he sat up and saw the two hard faces turned down at him. His hands came up in defensive attitude.

"It's come," Fog growled. "When they set one of your own hands to get you from the bush, the time has come."

"For them!" Steve barked. He leaned, jerked the man from the pool and set him on his feet. "All right, Moss," he snarled, "you can say your piece. I gave all you rannihans a chance to quit the Six-Gun when I came. You said you'd as soon draw pay under me as under anybody else. You didn't say you was drawing double for the time to gun me out."

Moss' face set stubbornly, sullenly. "I ain't sayin' a word," he ground out. "Not even if you beat me ha'f to death."

Steve lashed out. Moss winced, groaned, shook his head.

"Was it Art Landry, or his old man, King?" Steve demanded.

"He'll Talk, Or Go Out Swinging From A Limb!"

"I ain't talkin'. Dammit, I daren't!" Moss croaked.

Steve bent toward him, ready to fling another blow.

"Maybe," Fog Altrup suggested ominously, "it was Alice Colt."

"I can tell you, it wasn't her," Moss declared. He braced himself to catch another fist. It did not come. Steve gripped his collar and yanked him toward the horses.

"Take down your rope, Fog," he snapped. "He'll talk, or go out swinging from a limb."

"Bueno," Fog complied. Moss went dirty gray beneath the dirt upon his face. "You wouldn't dare, damn you!" he cried.

"We'll dare anything, now," Fog cheerfully, grimly assured him, flicking the noose of a lariat over the man's scrawny neck. Expertly, then, he flung the other end over a cottonwood limb above them. They were on the bank now. It dropped over several feet down to the creek bed.

"Last chance, man," Steve warned, his voice cold as the day was opposite.

"There's a law—" Moss started to croak. Steve pushed him off the bank, the tightening rope cutting off the man's words.

In silence, then, they watched him writhe and kick. Steve, casting a sidelong glance at Fog Altrup, decided that Fog was enjoying himself no end. There was savagery of a sort Steve had never known showing on Fog's thin face, and the smoky eyes of him were gleaming bright. It made Steve unaccountably ill inside.

"You ain't going to fool with him?" Fog expressed surprise.

Steve leaned, reached out and grabbed Moss' belt and pulled him back until the bank was beneath his feet. He supported him upright and loosened the constricting rope about Moss' neck.

"Any fighting I do will be with guns. I ain't a hangman, Fog," Steve asserted.

"Ummmn—yeah. I reckon so. I told you you wasn't the sort for the outside roads. You'll have your fling, but man to man. And meantime, they'll get you in the back."

Moss was gasping, pawing at his throat, a suggestion of insane terror in each movement that he made. Steve grasped him roughly, shook him. "Spit it out," he roared. "Who sent you to put a bullet in my back? Let's have it, bushwhacker, or off the bank you go."

"No!" Moss shrieked. "I—It was—*huh!*"

A little chunk of drying mud fell off his shirt. The stomach-turning sound of lead piercing yielding flesh was followed by the explosive grunt Moss gave. Rifle echoes chased each other up and down the length of Cicada Creek, and the thud-a-thud of running horses blended in. Another shot, and another, the sound drawing away, and seared leaves showered down from the tree under which Steve and Fog had stood.

"Somebody," Steve muttered harshly, arising from the spot where he'd flung himself down, "wants us, or me, almighty bad. But they wanted him worse—when he started to talk."

He stood looking down at the sprawled, deflated form of Moss, a somber brooding in his eyes. He wheeled, then, and stalked mastiff-like toward the horses.

"We'll send somebody back for Moss," he announced. "Me—I'm riding in to meet King Landry and throw this in his face."

"A show-down, and war's declared," Fog Altrup stated not unhappily. He settled in the saddle, waved mocking farewell to Moss' body, and continued: "With the red-headed girl wanting to run into the arms of the enemy, with King Landry wanting this ranch to complete his control of the range, and with something else—oh, I ain't asking what—eating on you, it promises to be a right nice time for all."

They rode back to the house, caught up fresh horses and prepared to ride to Bonestalk. Steve routed one of the few Six-Gun riders out of the blacksmith shop, an old-timer known as Whang Boyce.

"So Moss got it, fin'ly, eh?" Whang grunted. "You did it, eh? Well, I been wonderin' how long it'd be afore you opened your eyes to certain things, Steve. An' I ain't certain they're clear open yet."

He left Steve to puzzle or not over this cryptic statement.

Steve went to the house for a clean shirt. Alice Colt was in the kitchen. She cast him her usual look of dislike. Steve paused. "I just shot Moss," he informed her, watching her face. "Somebody had paid him to get me in the back."

"Why tell me?" she flung at him. "I've no use for you. You're hard, and you're standing in the way of far more than you know. You're carrying on a fight an outlaw started. Yes, worse than an outlaw, even if he was my father. Why don't you agree to sell, Steve?" She came near, tentatively touching his arm. "Perhaps

King Landry will pay you on the side and make it worth your while."

"Money—hell!" Steve snarled. "I told you that you didn't understand."

"I think I do!" She stepped back, her face working. "It's the outlaw in your blood, and this is a chance to fight and kill and step on the rights of others. Doesn't it make any difference to you that I love Art Landry, and you're making it impossible for us?"

"Not a bit," Steve assured her.

"I'll"—her voice was bitter—"fight you! I'll do everything in my power to help the Landrys whip you out of here."

"That," said Steve, "is what you ought to do. A woman worth the name will stick with the man she loves, no matter which side of the fence he happens to be on."

"Ah," she said softly, meaningly, "I begin to understand. I don't know who the woman is, but I begin to see. Steve—can't I help? Helping you, I may help myself, you see."

"There'll be no help, unless it's seeing King Landry broken, penniless, kicked into the street. His money that buys things enough that a woman can laugh at an honest man—"

He clamped his lips together, turned and departed rapidly, his spurs chirring like an angry rattlesnake. Fog Altrup awaited him, with a frown of puzzlement.

"What're you saying *you* gunned Moss, for?" he wanted to know.

"An idea," Steve said, grinning mirthlessly. "Somebody might doubt my word, give a sign. When they do, we'll have learned a lot."

CHAPTER IV

Shadows in the Dark

King Landry stepped around his desk and thrust his hand at Steve. "I was coming to see you," he said straightforwardly. "It is a pleasure to meet you—I hope."

"You should," Steve drily replied, not accepting the proffered hand. A worried expression flashed across the other's lined face. He sank back in his chair like one who has battled long, and is very, very tired.

Steve studied the man, frankly and wonderingly. His mind was open, and it crept through him as his appraisal was slowly made that King Landry was not what he'd expected him to be. He saw a weather-beaten old cowman of a day now past; saw a pair of open, honest eyes, thinning gray hair, a wrinkled face. King Landry bore the stamp of he who will fight hard and to the last fence with everything in his power—everything that can be included lawfully.

To save himself, Steve could not thrust back a growing likeness for the man. Yet there was that about King Landry that hurt—he could see Lois in the man. Bitterness assailed Steve once again.

"You're hanging tight to grass you don't need, even with the dry spell that we've had," Steve accused without further preamble. "You've fenced off water, shut Six-Gun in until we're running on the edge."

"I have," King Landry admitted. "It is my grass, my water, you see."

"And now you're paying Six-Gun riders off to gun me in the back." Steve sat back, watching. Fog Altrup stirred uneasily.

"Me?" King Landry croaked. "Ah, so that's it. You want to egg me on; you want to shoot me. Is that it?"

"Meaning, I suppose, you deny you did—hire a man to shoot me."

"Deny it? Stinett, I've never fought things that way in my life. When Red Colt was rustling, spoiling my water, burning my grass, I did hire men to protect my interests. Gunman, certainly. But I've never in my life fought as you've described."

"Your son, then, eh?"

"Art? No. He's hot-headed, and has

ideas. Alice Colt would take that out of him. For all she's Red Colt's daughter, she's a fine girl, just the same."

Steve leaned toward King Landry. "Have you any ideas, then?" he softly breathed.

"No," Landry admitted wearily. "I've no ideas. Only that I had prayed you'd be the type who'd see our side, and stand out of the way. This third person clause in Red Colt's will—we can fix that up. I'll pay a certain sum to take the Six-Gun. On the side, I'll make it worth your while.

"Stinett"—Landry was on his feet—"I've got to have that ranch. You can't know what it means to me. I've *got* to have it, man!"

"And if you don't get it?"

"Steve," she begged, "don't; please don't. You can't understand. You don't know what I've been through since then, nor how I've felt."

"You don't know how I felt, either," he bitterly replied.

She came on in. Looked at King Landry and explained: "This—this is the man that I talked to you about."

"I was afraid of that," he answered heavily.

Oblivious to her father and Fog Altrup, the girl swayed near to Steve. The man's fingernails bit into his sweaty palms as he held his arms stiffened at his sides.

"That day up there," Lois murmured, her eyes wet with unshed tears, "I was all at sea. I wanted to do what you asked,

"I've Been Drawn Into A Fight. By God, I'll Stick!"

"Ruin!"

Steve heard tumbling waters, saw the Squaw Grass in bloom, and heard wild, mocking laughter ringing in his ears. His heart went hard.

"Ruin, then!" he snarled. "And when you're broke, when all the land, the cattle, all the money in your bank is taken away from you, I'll maybe tell you why!"

He and Fog Altrup turned toward the door as the knob rattled. The door swung back, and Steve Stinett was rocking on his heel, his mouth agape, his heart hammering in his chest.

Lois swayed, there in the doorway, her face gone pale beneath her outdoors tan. "Ah," she sobbed, "I knew it would be you. There might have been another with your name—but I felt it, here." She put one hand to her heart and pressed it tight.

"It is funny," Steve found his voice. "It's funny as the devil. It's—why, it's almost as funny as what you found to laugh at, that last day up there."

Steve—and yet I was afraid. I—Oh, how can I explain? How can I make you understand?"

"No need to," he intoned. "I see how it is, now. A one-in-a-million twist of the deck has put me in down here. I stand in the way of your 'entire land, your money,' things like that. And you change your mind again. Oh, you're not laughing now. And you'll laugh less, later on."

She hung her head, then raised it defiantly. "So it's because of that you'll ruin my father, wreck my brother's marriage to Alice Colt—and break my heart."

"Not that alone," Steve admitted truthfully. "Half the Six-Gun is mine. I've been drawn into a fight. By God, I'll stick! Come on Fog, we've done enough in here."

"You have!" Lois cried. Then grasped his arm. "Steve, I'm sorry. I know, now, my own heart. If you wish—"

"Don't sell yourself so cheaply," Steve flung her arm away.

He heard her sobs as he stalked out.

"I think, Steve, you're wrong," Fog Altrup said, once they were outside and walking up the street. "Let the damned ranch go. That girl—excuse me. I won't horn in again."

Harsh, silent, tawny light in his eyes, Steve walked on. Slamming into Jervan Merns' mean office, he brought the lawyer to his feet. Merns' right hand made gesture toward the six-gun beneath his coat, then fell away when he noted no threat for himself in Steve's attitude.

"Merns," Steve rapped out, "do you know why King Landry stands to ruin if he don't get Six-Gun Ranch?"

"If I do," Merns said, after hesitation, "I'm not allowed to tell."

"The more I get into this, the more loco it gets to be!" Steve cried, exasperated. "Suppose I sell to Landry?"

"The third party gets the money."

"Would you care? What would you advise?"

"I'd fight until I lost the ranch."

"And the broken ranch itself would go to this third party."

"It would."

"I'll fight, then," Steve ground out. "But I don't think that I'll lose!"

Jervan Merns, a dark scowl on his cold face, watched the pair depart. He sat staring through his opened door until he saw them ride down the street and quit the town. Then he stirred about on urgent business of his own.

The Big A rider reined up abruptly. The bawl of a calf came from the mesquite thickets on the Big A line above Cicada Creek. He wrinkled his nose. There came to him the stench of burning hair and hide.

A hard set to his young face, he drew his pistol and spurred into the brush. He broke through into a little clearing in the thorny growth and came up short. Hatran, a heated running iron still in one gloved hand, stood above the hogtied calf. Plain as primer print was the fact a Six-Gun brand had just been run out over the Landry Big A.

"You and your skunk outfit has been asking for this a long time," the rider growled. "I think we've got you so's you'll get it, now."

"Why, no," Hatran said, all too easily for a man in his predicament. "It's you that'll be getting what we got to give." He turned his head. The rider turned his, too.

For an instant, his wide-sprung eyes set on the figure of Forty-Four Grilt who'd stood hidden to one side. Grilt's rifle was to his shoulder, and the spread of his lips was a grin of grim delight. The rifle crashed.

The Big A man's horse ran off aways, then stopped. Grilt snapped a shot that seared its rump and sent it racing off.

"Go on home, and let them know the hombre on you got shot," Grilt snarled. He touched the limp, huddled body that lay unmoving in the spot where it had been flung down from the saddle by the shot.

"There'll be hell to pay, sure enough," Hatran opined.

Grilt settled his restive horse. "And we're sure enough getting paid to raise the hell," he paraphrased.

They went off. The body of the youthful Big A rider lay lonely, pitiful beneath the hot sun. Down on the creek, a cicada commenced its strident chirring in a cottonwood tree. The hush of a breathless, quiet day prevailed.

It was the lull before the storm.

CHAPTER V

Killer Madness

In the twilight, a body of mounted men, led by Art Landry, came to Six-Gun Ranch. They rode with their carbines across their laps, their six-guns freshly filled. Straight to the bunkhouse, where

the Six-Gun riders lounged on benches near the door.

Alice Colt came running from the house, her hair glinting back the sinking sun's rays, a whimper of unknown fear rising in her throat. She came close to Art Landry's stirrup, then looked at Steve Stinett, who stood looking dispassionately up at the ramrod of the Big A.

"Art," the girl cried. "What is it?"

"It's murder, for one thing," young Landry heatedly declared. "One of my men came on someone here from this ranch, in the act of running a raw brand on a Big A calf. The signs are clear: they shot him and left him where he lay. There were two men—" his eyes now accusingly on Steve and Fog Altrup—"and we're going to have those two, or know the reason why."

Steve did not doubt that Landry spoke the truth. He turned slowly and his speculative gaze rested on this man, then that. He wondered at the way old Whang Boyce looked back at him. Grilt and Hatran had shifted to the edge of the bench on which they sat, letting their guns swing free.

"I don't expect the ones who done it to speak up," Steve said levelly. "But I aim to find out who did." He faced Landry again. "I'll settle this," he said.

"You'll settle it—now!" young Landry cried. "Alice, go back to the house. It's this Stinett and Altrup who did the job; did it to bring things to a head. Stinett wants to break the Landrys because—well, my sister's name has no place here."

"He'll kill you!" the girl remonstrated. "It's the scheme, don't you see. I won't go back to the house. Wait. Call the sheriff and let him handle this."

"The sheriff has been called. We'll have them ready for him when he comes. Go back to the house, I say!"

There was authority in his words, and Steve was compelled to admit to himself that Landry, for all his evident desire to be a hard one, was not all weak inside. Alice Colt hesitated, turned away. She paused to glare back at Steve.

"If you go on with this, I'll kill you myself!" she ground out. "You've no orders from me to carry on Red Colt's killing and rustling ways—and I still own half the Six-Gun Ranch." She went on, her shoulders shaking with every step she took.

"Well," Art Landry snarled. "Who killed my rider? Are you admitting it, Stinett, or are you—"

"Look out!" Grilt cried, springing up, freeing his gun and jumping for the door of the bunkhouse.

There had been no untoward movements, as yet, on the part of either side. Grilt's words were a bombshell that snapped tense nerves, broke the spell wide open and paved the way to hell with lead and smoke.

Grilt fired, and the roar of Hatran's gun made echo to the opening blast. A Big A rider reeled in the saddle, one hand pressed to his chest. A horse screamed and reared.

Reaction brought Steve's gun up magically. As his thumb drew back the hammer of the weapon and instinct aimed the muzzle at young Landry's heart, he knew he could not miss. White-faced, Art Landry swung his carbine up and down, his young body tensing to meet the shocking impact of a slug.

For a moment that seemed all of eternity, they stared at each other there, while horses reared and plunged all about them, while guns came up, came down and then flashed flame. Steve fired. But not at Art Landry's heart. Something outside him had jerked the pistol down. Art Landry's mount caught the bullet and went down, the bullet from Landry's rifle speeding harmlessly into the ground.

As he kicked his feet free of the stirrups, Landry knew his life had been spared, and he could not reason why. He ran, then, and gained the blacksmith shop. One of

his men crawled close to the bunkhouse and lay flat, biting his lips to still his moans as he suffered a punctured lung.

The rest scattered like quail, seeking points of vantage that they might carry the battle on. The bunkhouse door slammed shut, and for a brief space silence reigned supreme. The sun flashed a last ray before it sank from sight—a beam as red as blood. The purple shadows of twilight came on apace.

The first wild scramble done with, Steve turned toward the center of the bunkhouse. His chill, speculative eyes rested on Grilt, and like a panther stalking through the jungle growth, Steve glided up to face the near albino killer.

"It seems," he drawled flatly, "you *wanted* trouble, Grilt."

Grilt faced him back. "Maybe," he grunted. "I ain't never been one to let nobody tromp my tail, if that's what you mean."

"Not meaning anything specific. Meaning that you busted up our pow-pow—" Steve hunched as a rifle outside cracked and a man staggered back from the window, cursing fiery pain of a broken arm—"busted up our pow-wow when it wasn't aimed at you. *You* started this gunfight we're drawing in right now."

"Gunfight?" Grilt sneered. "We run inside and let them keep us holed."

Steve ignored this. "Moss," he muttered darkly, "started trouble, too. You know how I shot him, Grilt?"

"Aw—you!" Grilt flung out. "*You*, bragging that *you* killed him. The type who'd steal the notches off another man's gun, are you?"

Steve's chest seemed to swell. His pistol, clutched in the right hand that hung straight at his side, jerked to the twitch of his muscles. His face was like a wolf's: teeth bared, lips curled back. He leaned toward Grilt.

"So you know I didn't kill Moss, eh?" he charged. "Which means you did. Why, damn you? Why? Spit 'er out, you bushwhacking buzzard. Let's have the yarn."

"And if I did?" Grilt was defiant, confident.

"Why, I'll turn you over to the Big A for killing this other man, too."

"You can't pin that on me!" Grilt roared. "Nor nothing else."

"Take it for Moss, then," Steve croaked, his right arm crooking up.

The few men in the room forgot the danger from without. They spun around to watch the pair. And into the silence that was more pause of death than that, fell the age-tuned voice of old Whang Boyce.

"Hatran!" he warned. It was Fog Altrup who cared for him.

Grilt, too, had his gun in hand. And his arm too came up. The shuffle of moving feet, the wheezy gusts of breath expelled by the pair was added to by the bouncing sound of Fog's boots upon the floor. Guns roared, leaving tails of dirty flame rippling in the deep gloom of the room.

Grilt stepped backward, his arms flung wide as though he balanced on the tightwire of Life above the pits of Death. And that he did. He stepped backward once more, but the leg he thrust behind him would not hold; it doubled, sent him down with a twisting motion that brought him clear around. He was on his face, motionless, the heavy lead from Steve's gun through his heart.

It hammered through the semi-befogged brain of Steve that other guns had made soumd; and a dull, persistent thumping came through the gun-ringing in his ears. Slowly he turned.

Fog Altrup, a wild, tight grimness to his face, was looking down at Hatran, who lay upon the floor. Hatran's cadaverous face was mean with dying pain. The thumping Steve had heard, that had taken

him from the spell of after death, was the pounding of Hatran's hands upon the boards.

"He'd edged to one side, and was ready to burn you down," Fog yapped, elation in his voice, the smokiness of his eyes like rolling fog there in the gloom. Something cold gripped Steve inside. Was this what he would be? A man who lived within himself, who *loved* to kill—yet suffered for it in a dozen ways.

The decision was his to make, but only for the moment. Hatran tried to speak. Steve bent above him, and only Steve, and Fog, could catch the few words that he said. And one of them was "Merns." The little roundness that life had given the gaunt man went away with the ghastly, dryish rattle in his throat, and left him very flat, and very dead.

Steve's face went harsh once more. And then he swung around. Outside, guns took up the seeking tattoo again and lead ripped through the boards. Big A was trying to get them before full dark should come.

CHAPTER VI

Open Wounds

All the restraint Fog Altrup might have heretofore held was gone from him now. He'd tasted blood and the heart, the very soul of him, was crazily a-thirst for more. He ran to a window and emptied his gun at the scattered flashes all about the yard. A man out there called out in sudden pain. Fog laughed and urged fresh shells into his gun.

In the semi-darkness, Whang Boyce eyed Steve Stinett, then jerked his head at Steve. Steve gained the portent of that move. "Stop it!" he yelled at Fog.

The gunman spun. He seemed about to turn his gun on Steve. "You wanted it, didn't you?" Fog cried. "They want it, too, don't they? Ask them if they don't." He trembled visibly.

Steve turned. "Landry!" he yelled. "Hold up your fire."

He heard Landry call to his men, then yell back, "You coming out?"

"Landry," Steve called, "you're making a bad mistake. We've got the word of a dying man that someone besides you or me is making capital of our fight. We got the pair that killed Moss and—"

"To hell with Moss. You killed him yourself. We want you and that gray-eyed gunnie for killing our rider beyond Cicada Creek. Have you witnesses in there that will swear a dying man said he did that?"

"Nobody, outside of us two. But—"

"No buts," Art Landry yowled. "Bullets, not buts, till you two come trotting out."

"Ahhhh! They still ask for it," Fog snarled. He bent, scooped up Grilt's fallen gun, leaped to the door. No movement was quick enough to stop him; no words would stay him now. He leaped through the door, a blurred, bouncing, shrilling killer with guns in both deadly hands.

Straight toward the corral and the Big A horses there he ran. Flame thrust out from his pistols, driving men back, singeing them. He spun, dodged, ran on until he gained the mounts. He was up now, riding this way and that, hurling shots back at those that sought him, his luck a miracle.

Steve saw him round the barn, come pounding back. He groaned. "He's wild!" he cried. "He's stark mad."

"Partly," Whang Boyce agreed. "Mostly, though, Steve, just a killer on the loose. He'll rampage until he's kilt, or got his fill. Killers like Fog Altrup is sometimes damn' fine men. They'll go along, be friends with you, an' mebbe save your life. But when they once cut loose, they'd shoot you or their own brothers down."

Steve could hear Art Landry yelling at his men as Fog rode back and forth, his

guns a shuttle in a pattern woven of death. It stabbed Steve: if Fog killed Art Landry, how would Lois feel? He knew how he, Steve, would feel, and the knowledge gripped his soul.

"We've got to stop him!" Steve cried.

"Not me!" one of the others disagreed. "I'll face a rattler, or a mad dog. Not a thing like him."

"Wait," Whang warned, thrusting his face through a broken window and squinting in the dark. The pound of hooves, and now the splash of gunfire from another source gave reason for his word.

"In the name of the law!"

"Art—you crazy fool!" That was King Landry's voice.

King Landry and the sheriff had arrived. A half dozen, they scattered. Fog Altrup swerved toward them, hurling lead. His left-hand pistol ceased to roar; and then the right.

"Yahhhhh!" he shrieked, a rising note of triumph in his voice. "Next time you'll know to never ask me out."

He was gone, then; riding into the darkness, leaving only the echo of a crazy laugh behind. No thought of Steve; thoughts of no one save himself. His killing orgy done with, he left others to clean the mess and do the penance. That was the killer's way.

Gone, and they would not catch him. Not alive—never. And somehow, Steve was glad. Let Fog die among his own kind, along some outlaw trail; die with his boots on, violently. But never ingloriously. He had saved Steve's life this night, even as he'd plunged him into more trouble and despair he would not heed. So let him go.

"We're coming out!" Steve yelled. A silence fell. Hands high, he walked outside. The rest came, too.

"Whang," the sheriff snarled, "you're a lying old pot-hound."

"I heard Hatran say that him an' Grilt kilt the Big A kid," Whang insisted on his lie. Steve thanked him with his eyes. Fog gone, he alone really knew what Hatran had confessed.

"Why should they kill him, unless Stinett paid them to?" Art Landry squawked.

"Shut up," King Landry commanded wearily. "Haven't you taken enough into your hands to last you for a spell?"

"I paid them nothing to do nothing," Steve denied.

"You're holding something back!" the sheriff charged.

"You're Holding Something Back!"

Steve knew he was, and wondered why he did.

"It was Grilt and Hatran pulled them first two shots," Whang said to King. "Steve was set to auger peaceable. Art's got to admit that's so. It was Art himself who threw down on Steve first."

The fleeting moment when he knew Steve could have killed him rushed back into Art Landry's mind as his temper cooled a bit.

"Yes, I did. And he could have killed me—damn him! I wish he had. He whipped me with his fists, then spared my life with his gun. It's worse to feel I owe him that than to be lying dead outside."

Alice Colt, in the background of those grouped in the lamplit kitchen, gave a little cry. Her eyes sought Steve's, and he saw both hate and thanksgiving there. A strange blend indeed. And it was born suddenly within him, the reason that he would not tell what Hatran revealed.

He'd do the work they should do. He'd humble them before he broke them. He might triumph with a gun, but still be in defeat. He had to hurt them far, far more than that. And now he knew how.

"I—I don't know. I can't *sabe* this," the sheriff complained.

King Landry shook his head. "He spared Art's life. I don't think that the case would stand in court. Art couldn't testify—not against Stinett now. Neither could I."

"I'd like to!" Alice Colt exclaimed. "I'd like to tell how— But never mind. I couldn't either, now."

"That's why you did it, damn you," Art Landry groaned. "You're a devil, Stinett, and this is galling me more than any bullet you could pass."

Steve's lips curled in that mordant, nameless grin.

King Landry had spoken. The sheriff turned away, clumping from the house. King Landry waved Art out, and Whang Boyce stepped away. Only the glaring girl, the cattle king and Steve remained in the room.

"You think that halfway squares us?" King Landry asked, seating himself across the kitchen table from Steve.

"It might—for the time," Steve was curt.

"I don't think you killed those men, nor had anyone kill my rider on Big A."

"I didn't, so I don't care what you think."

"Stinett, I'm asking you again to sell. No, don't cut me off. I've got a tale to tell. I think, from what Lois told me, I know the reason you feel as you do."

"I didn't ask to come here, nor to be dragged into a fight," Steve pointed out. "I was stomped at, even if not on, and that's why I aim to stay."

"Don't say that yet," King Landry begged. "Hear me on out. I've *got* to have this ranch. Either that, or ruin. I've mortgaged my soul, almost, buying up this range. I've—" his voice fell and his face got almost gray—"I've even dipped into bank money that wasn't rightly mine.

"I can sell all of these holdings of mine, Stinett, for far more than enough to pull me through and see me fixed for life. A company in the east will buy it all to run a syndicate cattle outfit—but only if they get the entire block."

"The Six-Gun breaks your block, the syndicate won't buy," Steve mused aloud. "You crash down, and end up in the pen. I see."

Alice Colt strained forward pleadingly; King Landry sat silent, and very, very old. Steve held the futures of them all squarely in his hands.

Came once more, unbidden, a mental picture of Squaw Grass a-bloom in a mountain meadow; of his high hopes and pride —and a woman's laugh. He saw, too, the killer madness that had seized upon Fog Altrup, a man who took life and wrecked it, just as Steve could now. And there was the word of Hatran that only Steve could tell.

The lamplight gleamed against his teeth as his lips parted in that smile. He had his weapon now, and he'd use it to the hilt. Alice Colt cried out as Steve's words came, harsh, final, flat. King Landry sagged down lower in his chair, his chin upon his chest.

"No," Steve sentenced them. "I still won't sell!"

Was the ghost of old Red Colt there at his side?

CHAPTER VII
The Gift of Life

Steve rode to Bonestalk. The sunshine of a day that was relief from blinding heat, telling of autumn to come, failed to mellow his irritable mood. He hadn't asked for this inheritance that had brought him so much hell; hadn't wanted it,

consciously, the bludgeon that had come into his hand. But now that he saw the way, he'd ride it out.

His was the chance to strike back and wound in just the same manner as he had been struck and wounded. But first, he must kill a man.

He pondered that as he rode along, and the thought was as dark as the shadow cast by him and his horse. The man needed killing on Steve's account alone. He'd bought trouble, and death, and had even tried to have Steve's mark rubbed out.

The thing could not be settled until this man was dead. So Steve was going to kill him—if he could!

Perhaps it would put him on the roundabout road, if he won the gunfight he knew was coming up. He couldn't seem to care. At least, Lois Landry would know how it felt . . .

The thought of her seemed like a conjurer or a genii: it brought her there. Where the road dipped into a dry coulee lined with seared willows and live oak trees, he met her face to face.

She reined her horse and waited, blocking off the trail. Wordless, eyes steadily upon her, he stopped close and waited.

"Steve," she said, and there was something plaintive in her voice. It ripped him, and it was like she'd laid her hands fast on his heart. He steeled himself.

"Yes?" His tone was dull.

"I was coming out to see you," she announced, her hands tight about the saddlehorn. "I—I wanted to talk to you. About that day—up north."

"That's done," he told her.

"Oh, but it isn't!" she lamented. "And you know it's not. But for that, you'd never have fought us here."

"No? When I'm double-crossed, bushwhacked, falsely accused, you pride yourself to think it's you alone that holds me to the fight?"

Lois winced. Color suffused her face. "I was never sure," she began, "about my feelings that day, Steve." She hung her head and could not meet his eyes. In silence he waited.

"Later, I knew," she went on. "Knew how wrong I'd been, and how wrongly I had acted. I'm not pleading for my father now; I'm pleading for myself. Don't let this get you, Steve, and make you like Fog Altrup. Don't let me or anything hold you on the road you're riding now."

She held one hand toward him and tears streamed down her face.

He ached to lean, lift her from the saddle, hold her close while he kissed those tears away. It seemed shouted into his ear that he could not weaken now. She couldn't buy him with herself when she'd laughed at him before.

The inner voice goaded him to hurt her; to shame her for the offer that she'd made. "You're worrying about the money to have a lot of things that don't mean things in real life," he denounced her. "You're fretting about losing your position, things like that. You'd sell yourself to me, and expect your father to keep you on when that was done."

She couldn't speak. Could only sob and shake her head.

"It's so!" he barked, gathering up his reins.

"Steve!" the girl wailed. "Where are you going now?"

"You can worry about that too," he flung back, riding around her when she failed to move.

"God," she prayed, "stop him. There's murder in his heart."

Lois was right. The murder was there when Steve strode in and looked at Jervan Merns. The thin-faced attorney smiled uneasily. "What can I do for you today," he questioned.

"I'm wondering about that myself," Steve enigmatically replied. "And I think, right soon, we'll both find out."

"What is this," Merns demanded sharply, "a guessing contest?"

"Nope. The guessing is over now."

"What do you want, then, if you can't say what you mean?"

Steve focused his attention upon the cigarette gone cold in his left hand. He didn't want Merns to see his face, his eyes, right now. Merns might read too much there. He said:

"Merns, this mysterious third party—supposing he should die?"

"If that's worrying you, you can stop. He won't."

"Suppose he does, I asked!" Steve snapped.

"All right. While we're playing at suppositions, I'll humor you. If the third man in Red Colt's will should die, you and Alice Colt could do with the Six-Gun as you wished." Merns twisted a cigar between his teeth, and added, "But I'm warning you, this third man can take care of himself."

"He'd better, Merns," Steve growled. "And I'm going to tell you why." Steve raised his head so his hatbrim no longer hid his face. Merns gave a start, his hands creeping up toward the lapels of his coat.

"Why, no, not now," Steve warned in a soft voice that might seem amiable. It was a steel voice sheathed in the ebon velvet of the dead, or Death. It chilled Merns, yet did not frighten him. He had iron nerves, and a world of confidence in himself. He took the warning, lowered his hands and rested them on his desk.

"The story," Steve patiently explained, "is this: You are the third party in that will. If we sell, or we lose, the proceeds go to you. If Alice Colt and I sell for a huge sum—and you know that King Landry would pay such a sum—you'd be on top.

"You advised me to fight—knowing it meant losing out in the end."

"Supposing again," Merns interrupted harshly, "that you're correct in your assumptions. Why would I want you to fight and lose a broken-down outfit to me?"

"Because, Merns, you'd still hold the land. Somehow, you know the burr clump King Landry's landed in. With the Six-Gun land, you'd bleed him for nobody knows how much before you'd sell to him."

Merns sneered. "You're guesswork—" he began.

"Guesswork — hell!" Steve's attitude abruptly changed. He slid to the edge of his chair. "It ain't guesswork, you shyster son. Hatran talked before he died. He told how you had Moss gun for us, then killed Moss when he would have talked. He—" Steve lied—"told about branding that calf and killing the Big A kid. All to start trouble that would get us all wiped out. *That* ain't guesswork, and I can see it on your face you know you're done."

Merns stiffened. Stared hard at Steve.

"You wanted me in this thing," Steve accused, "so things would be stirred up, and Alice Colt couldn't sell to Landry for a penny, which would be all you would get. That was the one weak spot in your killer's scheme. And you saw to it that I was set on enough to refuse to play that way."

"I'll even tell you more than that—seeing that you're about to die," Merns challenged. "I wanted you killed, after you were here. I'd have gotten *your* share, and controlled things anyhow. That's what I'll do—*now!*"

He moved with the sudden motions of a released spring, kicking himself over sideways and to the floor. As he fell, his right hand flashed under his coat and flipped free the shoulder-holstered gun.

Steve leaped. The spurs which he had not removed dug great grooves in the top of his desk as he landed, skidding on it. He rocked to his knees. His thin face no longer cold, but bestial in angry surprise and thrusting fear, Jervan Merns half

rolled and jabbed his short-barreled pistol upward. The blast scorched Steve's face and the bullet ripped his hat brim.

He thrust his gun downward as he kneeled on the desk. His thumb slipped off the hammer. The roar of the heavy weapon beat in deafening waves against the walls. Merns' pistol slapped the floor, his knees came up to his stomach and then straightened violently. Steve closed his eyes; he did not care to see the results of the gunwork he had wrought.

He rocked there on his knees, the smoking pistol in his hand, sickness rolling his stomach and choking in his throat. Merns had to be killed, and he had been. For this, Steve was glad . . . More ways than one. For he now knew he could never be what he had feared he might: A born killer held fast by the lust for others' lives.

CHAPTER VIII
Heading North

Steve stared stonily at the jailer who released him from the cell wherein he'd been held for more than a day. He followed up the areaway between the cages and into the sheriff's office at the front. Alice Colt eyed him oddly, then moved back a pace. King Landry and Lois were there, too.

"Sit down, Stinett," the sheriff ordered. "We'll have this out."

Steve shrugged and sat down, keeping his attention for the officer and none for the rest. The sheriff moved a hand toward a pile of papers on his untidy desk. There were many packets of canceled checks in the pile; there was a small black book, and legal documents.

"I sort of regret these," the sheriff stated frankly. "They mean I've got to turn you loose."

"Yeah?" thought Steve. He cast a swift glance at King Landry, who retained a poker face. "You mean," Steve's thoughts continued, "King Landry knows the evidence—whatever it is—is for me, and said for me to be set free."

Aloud, Steve said: "The evidence of my hat and my scorched face should've been enough. *You* saw how Merns was shot—through one ear. He was bound to have shot at me first, because he could never in this life have pulled a trigger after my shot hit him."

"In that book, Stinett," King Landry spoke up, "are the records of Jervan Merns' private transactions. There are notations of money paid to Moss, Grilt, and Hatran. We found Red Colt's codicil wherein Merns was named as third party to get either money from a sale of Six-Gun Ranch, or the ranch itself if you and Alice went broke and couldn't carry on a fight against me. I don't know how, but Merns knew how I stood about that syndicate matter. That was his main reason for all he did."

"So I'm free," Steve said without apparent joy. "So being the case, sheriff, you'll give me back my gun."

"You'll not wear it in town," the sheriff gruffly warned.

"Free," Alice Colt half sobbed, coming into the picture again. "Free to belt on that gun and carry on the deviltry my father knew you would." There was more of poignant despair in her voice than bitterness or hate.

Steve ignored her completely. He took his bundled belt and holstered gun and tucked them under his arm, then faced King Landry. Landry, bleak resignation in every look and move, stepped aside to let Steve pass. Complete master now, Steve held Six-Gun Ranch in full control. He could sell to whom he chose, and half the money would be his. And Landry knew if Steve sold, the buyer would not be himself. So ruin was Landry's lot.

Shoulder to shoulder with the tottering cattle king, Steve stopped. Again that intangible something flowed, it seemed, from

King Landry to himself. He felt respect for the man, and the feeling was not begrudging.

"Landry," Steve growled, "I want to talk to you. You can bring the ladies along." He stalked out, leading the way to Landry's office behind the bank. Bewildered, wondering, they followed him.

Once inside, his ripped hat and gun lying symbolically aside upon a chair, Steve lost no time. "Landry," he spat, "make out a bill of sale."

Tense, surprised silence, broken, then, by King Landry's exploded words: "You mean you'll sanction sale?"

"What," Steve demanded, "do you think I killed Merns for?"

"Steve!" Lois cried. "You killed him so there would be no third party—"

"Partly, at least. The other part was the personal side of it."

"But he might have killed you."

"Happens," Steve growled, refusing to look at her, "he didn't."

Alice Colt was shaking her head, her eyes unbelieving and big. Her lips trembled for speech, but no words would come. King Landry's hands shook as he fumbled forth bills of sale and dipped a pen in ink.

"Make it all out proper," Steve directed. "Fill it all in but the amount of cash to be paid. I'll write *that* in myself."

"That's it!" Alice Colt cried. She spun toward King Landry. "Never mind," she assured him. "Half of what this trickster holds you up for will come to me. I'll turn it back to you."

"Yeah," Steve rejoined. "Half comes back to you." To Landry: "And this is going to cost you—plenty!"

"Plenty?" King Landry echoed blankly.

"Plenty, I hope," Steve said with emphasis.

Hurt more than ever he had hurt her before, Lois turned away that Steve might not see the tears now in her eyes, nor the pulse that hammered and quivered in her throat. King Landry bent his head and commenced to write.

"There," he said heavily, yet with great relief. He shoved the bills across. Alice Colt signed, glaring hate at Steve as she handed the pen to him. He took it, breathed deeply, bent, then paused. This moment was his, and he wanted to savor it to the fullest. Yet, as he tried, he knew the taste was lost. He could not feel triumph in what he was about to do. The whip had lost its lash. Still, there was nothing left to do. Swiftly, then, he signed his name. His pen moved to the amount King Landry must pay for Six-Gun Ranch.

"There," he muttered, pushing the sale bills back.

The ticking of a clock fell heavily into the deep quietude of the room; the very air was laden with suspense. King Landry picked the papers up with the swift motion of one wanting to take his bitter medicine and have it done.

"My God!" he cried. "What's this?"

"What's what?" Alice almost screamed. Lois turned pale.

"The price," King Landry choked, "is *one* dollar!"

"To be paid," Steve reminded, "in half dollars."

Alice Colt pressed her hands to her breast and sat down heavily. Lois stared vacantly, unable, yet, to fully comprehend.

"You said," King Landry reminded, "it would cost me plenty."

"I thought," Steve rumbled, "that it would. I saw how Art was hurt because I spared his life. I wondered how much it would hurt all of you, now, to owe your all to me."

He frowned, shook his head and his expression was one of bewilderment. "But now that's done, I don't want it that way at all!" he almost yelled. "I don't want you to feel beholden to me. I don't want you to be hurt and humiliated or anything

like that. I had no right to half of Six-Gun anyhow; I didn't want the place."

Alice was sobbing; so was Lois. With motion dazedly slow, King Landry laid two half dollars on his desk. Steve picked them up. He went to Alice, picked one hand from her lap and laid one of the coins in her palm.

"I'm s-sorry about the way I treated you, thought of you," she sobbed, clutching the half dollar tightly.

"You had a right. I told you what was in my mind: I wanted all of you to be sorry, indebted and ashamed. But I don't want that now. I want to feel I've done something I should; something decent."

"But—" King Landry began.

"The more we talk the worse it'll be," Steve cut in. "Let's figure it over and done."

He snatched up his hat and gun, reached the door in one long stride, and before they could even stir, was gone.

A packhorse trailing, slouched in the saddle of his ridden mount, Steve Stinett left Bonestalk. The Devil's Basin bade him no farewell—he just rode out.

At the spot where Lois had stopped him two days before, a thin stream of water now ran. Steve stopped. He told himself he but paused to water his horses. But, as they'd been watered upon leaving just a bit before, he knew he lied to himself. He wondered why he loitered to so morbidly torture himself with memories.

The sound of a horse's hoofs left him indifferent. He did not look back. And then Lois was at his side. A starry-eyed Lois whose flushed cheeks betokened excitement; perhaps excitement of the sort that comes with expectations of high adventure always ahead.

Steve opened his mouth, then shut it without speaking. Somehow he failed to feel surprise. Lois laughed happily, and turned in the saddle to untie the roll on the cantle. She slipped down and fastened the roll to the scant load the packhorse bore. Then she mounted her saddlehorse again.

Steve might have reminded her she was going into a mountain meadow where the Squaw Grass bloomed, the waters tumbled, or the snows lay often deep. He did no such thing. Lois had told him, that last day up north, that he felt things. And so he did.

"You're going, because you want to go," he said simply.

"Because I know now I'm mad to go—and because I love you."

She leaned toward him, and he toward her. And after a bit, side by side, they rode on . . . Heading into the north.

FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE

By

CHARLES M. MARTIN

An Exciting Drama of Love, Hate and Rangeland Greed, Packed With Action And Breathless Suspense

Don't Miss This Outstanding Novel

The Cactus City Department

VOL. 17 NO. 47

OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Cactus City Marches On!

Cactus City's newest business enterprise, which is located next door to the Studhorse bar, had a Grand Opening last Friday. The Ladies Sociable Society sure got up in their arms about this place, saying what a pity and a shame. But for once, they got theirselfs caught in their own loop. You know, they always is talking about Civic Pride and Progress, etc. So when they started squawking, why someone asked 'em right back, "Where is your Civic Pride?" and "Do you want that hang-dog town of Mesa Springs to be boastin' that Mesa Springs has more Honky-tonks than Cactus City?"

That sure shut up the Ladies, and ever since they have been paying no attention to what wasn't any of their business in the first place.

Very fitting and appropriate, the new Honky-tonk has been named the Mare's Nest.

OUR PRIDE & JOY

Mrs. Seton was the next female to up and complain about something. She opined that Saloons and Bars made our main street an eye-sore, and that said Saloons and Bars should be made to move off'n the main street. Her complaint, howsoever, was quelched by Mayor Broadaxe Boyle. He allowed, and rightly too, that if'n the bars was made to move off'n the main street, why the main street (now) wouldn't be the main street any more, so what the hell was the use.

Well, from those two items you can see what sort of damfoolishness went on during the last Council Meeting. There was a lot more of the same, and none of it as important as the poker game.

MINE SOLD—ALMOST

Single-Jack Muffs Sale

The Red Hill Mine almost got sold again the other day. It would have been the thirty-ninth time it has been sold to some sucker if'n Single-Jack Johnson, who owns it, hadn't got careless.

This time, Single-Jack was going to sell it for a tin mine. And he sure had it looking mighty convincing, cause I had a look at it. If I didn't know Single-Jack, I would have swore that he had accidentally stumbled onto a nice ledge of solid tin about two feet wide nestling in a fissure of the rock at the end of the shaft.

Well, with his usual luck, Single-Jack found hisself a dude who was anxious to go into the mining business, and he took the sucker into the shaft and showed him the ledge of tin. It looked like a sale right off, but the dude was one of those curious hombres who can't let well enough alone. With a pick he chipped a piece of tin out'n the ledge, and in so doing he sure ruined Single-Jack's handiwork. Right in the middle of the ledge of solid tin, the dude found a piece of colored paper, and on the paper was printed, "SOLID PACK TOMATOES."

Single-Jack had done forgot to take the labels off'n the cans when he was salting in the tin.

THE PROF'S O.K.

A lot of folks thought Professor Hoenshall had gone plumb loco the other morning when he come out of the hotel and walked down the street bare naked. But hell, the Professor is just absent-minded like, and had forgot to put his clothes on.

PERSONALS

The other night two curly-tail rannyhans put on a right good fist fight at the Longhorn Café and Lunch Counter De Luxe. They both had come to the Longhorn each thinking they was going to take T-bone Tillie out. Well, they argued over it, and pretty soon they tangled, and of course when they got through neither one of them was fit for an evening of fun.

Some of the local busybodies and gossipers says it was a shame that Tillie would allow two men to brawl over her. Why, they ask, didn't she choose one of them and thus prevent a gory fist fight. But Tillie had an answer for them, you bet. She declares, "When two dogs get to fighting over a bone, you never see the bone butt in and take a hand in the fight, do you?"

THE DUDES ARRIVE

Riders at Dude ranches sure catches themselves a lot of hell from the dudes, especially the female kind. It takes pretty sharp tongue to make these tourists shut up and mind their own business. Like the other day when Rawhide Rawlins was trying to ride down a bad bronc out to the SPSS&C. Every time he'd top the bronc, it would throw him forty or fifty feet. And each time Rawhide would get up, do some tall cussing, then walk back to the bronc and top him again.

Pretty soon a female dude came along and proceeded to give Rawhide hell for cussing out the poor little horse, just because the poor little horse bucked him off.

"Now, ma'am, you got me dead wrong," answered Rawhide, very polite like. "I ain't cussin' the pore little horse. No! I don't mind gettin' bucked off atall, but I hate like hell to walk back."

EDITORIAL

The sudden death of Dopey Doran is a fine example of what ignorance will do for a man. If Dopey had been able to read he would be here on earth forking hay instead of down below shoveling coal. The other night Dopey swilled down what he thought was a pint of Dr. Tonkin's Elixir for Man and Beast. But it wasn't, as Dopey would have known, if he could read. Hell, a pint of hair-oil would kill anybody.

AT THE BAR

Just like was predicted in the Gazette a while back, it looks like Blackstone, the lawyer, ain't going to last much longer around these parts. Being just a lawyer is bad enough, but being a poor one is even worse, and it looks like Blackstone either ain't smart enough or ain't crooked enough to be a good one. He won't even take a case unless a man has a good alibi. And if a man has an alibi for whatever is charged against him, what in hell does he want with a lawyer?

OBITUARY

Folks was kind of relieved when Baldy Ballard cashed in last Friday. It always is sort of sad if'n a gent dies of disease or old age or some other unnatural ailment, and that is what everybody expected Baldy to die of. At various times he had experienced just about every failing the saw-bones could find a name for, from bunions to brain-fever. But at the last minute, Baldy fooled us all, and everybody was mighty glad that it wasn't some awful sickness which took him. Baldy died a natural death in a gun-fight.

NO SENSE OF HUMOR, NOHOW

It is too bad that Algy Twombley-Twombley is a Englishman, because he is a extremely upright and able citizen as well as being a gentleman (which same is a very rare and precious article in this country right now, if you ask me. In fact there is very few of us.) But being a Englishman leaves Algy with a sort of vacant spot in between the ears so that he don't sometimes see a joke until maybe four or five months later.

Now, by itself that is perfectly all right, and no harm done, because I guess a joke is just as funny next Fourth of July as it is today. But when it comes to a quick little joke, meant to be just temporary amusing for a few minutes, why that delay is liable to turn a joke inside out. And by next Fourth of July the joke maybe will turn out to be a tragedy of the first waters.

Something of the sort happened recently when Algy got in another carload of horses, a fancy dude-breed which he calls "Jumpers." That name means just what it says. In other words, a jumper jumps. I know, because I seen one jump as high as a man's head with his hat on. (No, I don't know what it proves when a horse can jump that high. That is dude business, and I am no hand to understand it.)

Anyways, Algy was kind of worried what to feed these jumpers as they ain't been used to alfalfa hay and oats like ordinary horses and maybe such rations would take all of the jump out of the Jumpers. Algy made the mistake of saying these worries out loud, and of course he came in for some advice from the cowhands he has hired to play nurse to his horses.

It was Sonora Sol who talked the loudest, and therefore got Algy's attention. Sol (who never in his life saw a Jumper horse before) claimed that his family for years had raised the champion Jumpers of the World, and that the secret of their success had been handed down from one generation to another. For one quart of whisky, he would let Algy in on this secret.

Algy called him immediate, so Sol gave forth his secret. The way to raise Champion Jumpers, he says, was to feed them Jumping Beans.

Of course, all the boys got a chuckle out of that and went on about their day's chores, thinking it was a pretty good joke. But it was different with Algy. You see, it wasn't yet Fourth of July, so Algy hadn't found out it was only a joke, and of course nobody had thought to tell him. So right away Algy cut the breeze for Little Tijuana and bought up all the Jumping Beans he could find. Back at the ranch he followed Sol's joking directions and fed the raw beans to his Jumpers, making the nags swallow them without chewing them up.

Of course, as soon as these beans got warmed up, they started their work of jumping. Without a doubt, the commotion inside them was something of a surprise to the horses, who also didn't know it was only a joke. In less time than it takes to tell about it, those Jumper horses went completely loco. They tore out'n the corral the hard way, and high-tailed for the open country.

From all reports, these Jumpers pass mighty well as runners too, cause one of them was seen not far from the New Mex line. And from reports too, maybe the joke will turn out to be on Sol after all. It was rumored that these nags was doing some tall jumping when last seen. Down in Brimstone County, they say that one of them jumped clean over a high mountain. (But of course them Brimstoners ain't very accurate sometimes, besides being awful liars.)

Anyways, everybody is kind of ashamed to explain to Algy that Sol was only joking. I guess we will just have to wait until next Fourth of July for Algy to find out it was only a joke, losing all his Jumper horses.

THE SIX-GUN PARSON

by

ED EARL REPP

Rev. Steve Burke Was A Preacher On Sunday And A Six-Gun Deputy United States Marshal On Monday—Saving Men's Souls One Day And Sending 'Em To Skull Orchard The Next. No More Feared And Respected Lawman Ever Pulled A Trigger In Old Oklahoma

Few lawmen ranging through the lawless Indian Territory of Oklahoma in the roaring '80's and '90's enjoyed a more action-crammed career than Rev. J. S. "Steve" Burke, who had the distinction of being a lead-slinging sky-pilot on Sunday and a rip-snorting deputy U. S. Marshal on Monday.

If fire and brimstone ever flickered through a man's life, they just about ruled Steve Burke's during his colorful career as an outlaw buster. He not only preached these two elements to his congregations in and about Lawton in its wildest days, but he materialized them into action. As a result, he made life plenty hot for such man-killing desperadoes as Zip Wyatt alias Dick Yeager, Bill Doolin, Crawford Goldsby alias Cherokee Bill, Little Dick West, Jim Guy, Pink Lee, Andy Kuykendahl, Ollie Yountis, Buss Luckey, the Daltons, the Buck Gang and many others preaching their own brand of six-gun gospel and making folks like it.

N. H. Rose

The Reverend Steven Burke, Deputy U. S. Marshal, as he looked at the height of his career in Oklahoma.

Marshals Billy Tilghman, Heck Thomas and Chris Madsen, Burke's brother officers and companions on many a bloody manhunt, have frequently been called "The Three Guardsmen of Oklahoma." Whoever bestowed that romantic title upon them either deliberately or inadvertently overlooked Steve Burke as the fourth man in that combination of gun-fighters. If public records and private accounts of his daring exploits can be relied upon, Steve Burke did as much toward making Oklahoma safe for posterity as any other lawman of his day.

In many cases he did more. He was absolutely fearless and more than once

took up the trigger trail in No Man's Land where few other officers dared to tread.

It was Steve Burke who helped Billy Tilghman put the skids under the notorious Bill Doolin Gang, the worst bunch of six-gun desperadoes that ever rode the Owl Hoot in Indian Territory. It was Steve Burke who led a posse of brother officers on the trail of the murderous Red Buck and cornered him near Arapaho on March 15th, 1896.

As always with Burke, he gave the other fellow first chance. But Red Buck replied to an order to surrender by going for his gun. A sad mistake, considering that Steve Burke had few equals when it came to quick gun-play. Red Buck died promptly with his boots on.

Many tales of Steve's exploits have come our way from old timers claiming to have known and associated with him during his heyday. In almost every instance they say he was a man of unlimited courage, firm in his convictions and determined that right should prevail over wrong.

He was of the old school of frontier preachers and he liked to preach of Satan and hell's fires. Old timers paint colorful word pictures of him standing in his improvised pulpit, armed to the teeth, the heels of his twin six-shooters bulging under his long frock coat.

It required courage in those days to even preach the gospel in Indian Territory. Such preachings hurt business for the saloon and dive-keepers. Almost every conversion of a man to Christianity removed a potential paying customer from the saloons. It was natural then for Steve to incur the enmity of dive-keepers everywhere he set up his old buffalo hide tent.

Like many missionaries do today in uncivilized parts of the world, Steve Burke carried the word of God to the Cimarron. In fact he is said to have introduced it there. Nobody denies that it needed it.

But he was not the kind of a preacher to take a slap in the face and then turn the other cheek. In cases like that, only two blows were struck. Steve unlimbered the second and so potent was the power behind it that the trouble usually ended there unless the other went for his gun. The sky-pilot never shirked that kind of a scrap either, and the fact that he lived through the thick and thin of those stirring days proves that he was a lead-slinger par excellence.

Steve was known throughout Oklahoma and the Indian Territory as "The Six-Gun Parson." Just where he was born is not definitely known. One report states that he was ushered into the world in Fannin County, Texas, along in 1850. Another says he was born in El Paso in '55. One of them may be correct.

Nevertheless, those who knew him declare he talked with a pleasing Texas drawl and was a wizard on the draw, using a style indigenous to Fannin County, from which a good many of the old time gunfighters like Wes Hardin migrated. It was called the Fannin County draw, comprising a peculiar twist of the body sideways with the forearm and elbow held close to the side.

Steve Burke is said to have been one of the few two-gunmen able to draw as quickly with either hand. His accuracy was deadly. He had a natural gift of shooting from the hip and without apparent aim he could shoot a cigarette from a man's mouth without even burning his lips.

But for all his gun wizardry, Steve Burke was a humane man. He was gentle and kind and charitable and only used his guns when necessary to protect his own life. Self-preservation has always been the first law of nature. It was Steve Burke's law.

Little is known of his early life and the few fragmentary facts available are scarcely worthwhile recording here. He must have attended school somewhere in Texas, for he was a man of brilliant education, particularly in religious matters.

He turned up in Lawson in the late '80's. There he established, as far as is known, the first tabernacle ever seen in the Indian Territory. It was a large tent. Once it had been canvas. But when he appeared in Lawson and set it up, it was so full of holes that he had to make it over with buffalo skins. For pews he used pine planks and for a pulpit he borrowed a whisky barrel.

Burke Earns His Title

Here he earned the sobriquet of "The Six-Gun Parson" because he never appeared in the pulpit or anywhere else without his big .44's hanging slantways around his thighs. But in spite of this six-gun challenge to the wild bunch, he had a difficult time getting started because the more unscrupulous dive-keepers banded together with their best gunmen to drive him out of town.

At first they threatened and bullied, declaring that his church and his preachings were hurting their business. But they picked on the wrong sky-pilot. Steve Burke didn't scare worth a damn. They even tried to buy him out. He laughed in their faces and preached all the harder. He mounted his pulpit and scathingly denounced the saloons and all that they stood for. Furthermore, he announced that if anybody wanted him to leave town, they'd have to carry him out feet-first.

Having thus challenged the wild bunch, he greased his holsters and held revival meetings every night. He won converts by the hundreds. Lawton's saloons begged for business. Prices were lowered, dancing girls imported. But only the harder characters were lured by this bait. Burke held his converts together and the wild bunch decided it was time to act.

One evening while he was preaching he saw a half dozen hard-faced gunmen enter his tent and slide into various pews. He knew instantly what they were there for. Without pausing in his tirade against sin, he quietly drew his hog-legs and placed them beside his open bible.

Possibly the reader will recall the scene in that epic film of Oklahoma's land rush, "Cimarron" in which Yancy Cravat appeared as a sky-pilot and was forced to shoot over the heads of his congregation at a gang of gunmen sent to his tabernacle to kill him.

That scene is unquestionably the portrayal of Steve Burke's battle under the same circumstances that night in Lawton. The moment the gunmen appeared in his tabernacle he sensed trouble. Seeing his .44's, men and women in the congregation began ducking down. Steve Burke went on preaching and watching.

Suddenly the gunmen began raising a disturbance. They heckled him, laughed outright, trying to anger him. But Steve held tight to his anger, fearing some of his lambs might be injured. His face was crimson with fury. He switched from his subject and began *preaching* directly at the gunmen.

So hot was his denunciation that it angered the gunmen. Suddenly they were fed up. One of them unlimbered and sent a slug whistling past Steve's face.

Instantly his guns were in his hands and exploding. The congregation ducked down between the pews. Lead flew thick and fast over their heads. Women screamed and fainted. Men swore softly. Steve Burke stood upright at his pulpit, his .44's roaring. For a full minute the bitter battle raged unchecked. Then one of the hecklers slewed clear around under the impact of a .44 slug. The smoke was so thick that it was hard to tell how many of them were hit.

But Steve Burke miraculously escaped injury. His pulpit was riddled with lead, his frock coat snagged in several places. When the smoke cleared, two gunmen lay sprawled out on the dirt floor. The other

N. H. Rose

ZIP WYATT

Death was the price he paid for tangling with the Six-Gun Parson. Taken just before his death.

four were standing with their hands raised. Steve's guns were empty, but he covered the men until officers arrived to hustle them off to the calaboose.

Unquestionably Steve could have killed them all had he been so inclined. He is said to have declared afterward that he was afraid of hitting his congregation and purposely shot high.

In any event, when news of the fight circulated around, and it flew fast, Managing Deputy U. S. Marshal Bill Nix sought out Steve next morning in his "study," a small 7x7 tent at the side of his tabernacle. Nix had been hearing much about the scrappy sky-pilot and needed a man of his type to assist him in running down the Doolins and others.

"You can't bathe them coyotes in the blood of the lamb, Steve," said Nix. "It takes hot lead to convert Oklahoma."

"So I've discovered," grinned Steve. "I'm doing my best."

"You sure are, parson, an' I'm with you," praised the marshal. "But I've got a proposition to make. I need help, Burke. How would you like to throw your guns in with me an' Bill Tilghman an' the other boys on the force? I'll appoint you a deputy U. S. Marshal an' you can dish out religion on Sunday and lead for law an' order on Monday. We need men like you, Burke, and six-gun gospel is the only kind the wild bunch of Oklahoma will recognize. What do you say?"

"I don't know," replied Steve hesitantly. "I never learned to handle guns with the idea of taking human life."

"From what I hear," said Nix, "you sure *learned* how to handle 'em! But Oklahoma needs a good cleanin', Steve. We got more dirt here than my office can clean out, held down by the lack o' good men. Supposin' you think my offer over an' let me know tomorrow morning?"

"I won't promise anything, Nix," said Burke, "but I'll sleep on the idea tonight and let you know what decision I've made."

All that day Burke struggled to reach a decision. That night he slept on the idea. Perhaps he prayed a good deal for Divine guidance. Anyway, by morning his mind was made up. Nix was elated when he appeared bright and early at his office to swear-in. The parson was appointed a deputy U. S. Marshal immediately.

Nix had big plans for the capture of the Doolin Gang at that moment. He promptly assigned Burke to go with Marshals Hixon, Jim Masterson, Lafe Shadley, Dick Speed and A. H. Houtson to Ingalls for the purpose of apprehending the gang which was known to be carousing there.

Fight With the Doolin Gang

Steve temporarily closed up his tabernacle and posted a sign announcing he would hold services as usual on the following Sunday. Then with his brother officers he concealed himself in a farm wagon, covered by a tarpaulin, to be out of sight when they reached Ingalls.

On September 1st, 1893, the posse was driven into that town. A tip-off led them to where the desperadoes were holding out. They concealed themselves about the place and sent word to Doolin that surrender would be the better part of valor.

As expected, Doolin refused and the battle, perhaps the wildest and bloodiest ever staged between outlaws and lawmen in Oklahoma, was underway. The little town of Ingalls became a battlefield. Burke and his companions immediately unlimbered on the Doolins' hangout with their six-shooters and carbines.

Doolin had the wildest, blood-thirstiest members of his gang with him at that time. There were, besides himself, Bill Dalton, Tulsa Jack, Dynamite Dick, Little Bill, Bitter Creek Newcomb and George Wrightman alias Red Buck. That was seven outlaws against six lawmen.

It was in this bitter battle that the famous Rose of Cimarron, Bitter Creek's sweetheart, performed the one act that brought about the escape of the outlaws. Through a hail of lead she carried a rifle to Newcomb. With it he thrust back a charge by the lawmen, forcing them to retreat. He was badly wounded at the time. But it made no difference. It was a fight to the finish and he fought with his sweetheart by his side.

Marshals Houston and Speed were killed, some say by this same rifle that Rose carried to her lover through a cross-fire of singing lead. The fight lasted more than an hour. Toward the end Lafe Shadley lost his life.

Then Burke led another charge on the outlaws. So intent were the officers upon avenging their dead, the Doolins lost courage and broke into the open for their horses. Burke managed to get between them and their mounts. But he was driven back.

He retreated to his companions who had literally dug in on Ingalls' main street. Their positions were noticeable only by the puffs of smoke that floated from their hot guns.

The outlaws reached their horses and retreated to a barn on the edge of town. Burke led a charge after them. But Doolin and Bill Dalton courageously flung them back. In a withering fire they assisted Newcomb onto his horse and headed into the timber behind the barn.

Burke and his companions gave chase. It lasted until nightfall and then they had to give up. They lost three of their number. The killers made good their escape.

After that things were worse than ever in Oklahoma. The outlaws pulled off a long string of holdups and killings that kept the officers constantly on the jump. Steve Burke was given little chance to preach in his tabernacle, but he managed to hold infrequent meetings.

Shortly after the Ingalls battle, he joined up with Bill Tilghman, Captain Heck Thomas and Chris Madsen in a con-

certed effort to bring the gang to justice. They trailed the desperadoes into remote hiding places in the Osage country and even into the Wichita Mountains. On a trail in Payne County, a known hangout of the band, they met a girl known only as Cattle Annie who had been keeping the Doolins informed as to the whereabouts of the lawmen.

At that time they had no idea that she was connected with the gang. But the moment she saw them heading toward Rock Fort, she sent a messenger to Doolin warning him of their approach. So when the officers reached their objective, the birds had flown.

But Steve Burke was soon to nip Cattle Annie's practices short. Through her tip-off, the Doolins escaped and hopped into Arkansas and then into Missouri where on May 20th, 1894, they robbed a bank and killed a man named Seaborn. Thereafter they rode into Texas and staged the most successful robbery of their career, taking $50,000 in bank notes from a bank.

Burke soon got word that they had holed-up in No Man's Land. Against the advice of his fellow officers, he hid his badge of authority and rode boldly into that dangerous land of desperadoes to hunt for them. He had many brushes with badmen, but failed to get close enough to the Doolins to be bothersome.

He returned to Lawton, feeling sure that the outlaws would return to their old haunts. They did, in due time.

Meanwhile, Steve ran into a streak of luck. He got a tip that Cattle Annie was in town watching his movements and keeping Doolin informed. With Bill Tilghman as his companion, he started out to round up the girl who, with her friend, Little Breeches, bear the distinction of being Oklahoma's most noted female bandits. Annie was only eighteen, but she was old in experience. Behind her she dragged a long string of crimes ranging from killing to rustling. Little Breeches also had a record and her bone-heeled six-shooter was well notched.

Little Breeches was only seventeen. She never wore skirts. Like any of the Doolins, she was a crack shot and for downright cussedness some declare she was even worse than Belle Starr as a spiller of claret.

Both Cattle Annie and Little Breeches had sweethearts in the Doolin bunch. Love is thicker than water. They generally acted as spies for the band. At times they served as lookouts while the gang was staging a raid.

At other times they did a little owl hooting of their own. On one occasion they alone rustled 200 head of cattle at one shot from the Spike S ranch. That is considered quite a job for a couple of top hand gentlemen rustlers. But it was not too tough for this pair of quick-shooting hellcats. They not only performed the task without any assistance, but actually sold the steers.

By tracing these steers to their source, Burke was able to locate the pair of deadly females. With Tilghman he trailed them to Canadian City, mainly in the hope that they would lead them to the Doolins. On reaching that town they got a tip that the girls were holding out in a ranch house on the outskirts.

The officers immediately went after them. The Outlaw Queens, however, learned through mysterious channels that the law was after them and were set to leave the house when Burke and Tilghman appeared. The minute they saw the lawmen, they dashed back out of sight and started shooting.

Capture of Cattle Annie

But feeling sure that the girls were the only persons occupying the house, they made a charge upon it. Burke ran around to the rear door while Tilghman bore down on the front. Their determination to arrest them must have un-

nerved the pair, for they ceased shooting and made bold efforts to escape.

Cattle Annie made a break through the rear door right into Steve's arms. He went down with her on top of him and fighting like a ton of wild cats. But let's listen to what Burke had to say about that mêlée later.

"She tore into me like a catamount," he related. "I never knew a woman could fight so viciously or so powerfully. She was strong as a she-grizzly and slashed at me with tooth and toe-nail. For a few moments I thought Satan himself had gotten a strangle hold on me. I actually had to fight as powerfully as I'd ever fought a man! She was like a female buzzsaw!

"She snatched out a Bowie knife and tried to rip me open. Somehow I got hold of her wrist and then she bit me! Believe me, boys, she'd have cleaned me up if I hadn't managed to clout her one on the chin. It wasn't a hard one, but she bit her tongue. That made her cry. I had her then! Poor kid!"

During that scrap Tilghman had his own troubles. Little Breeches escaped through a window and vaulted into her saddle. She pulled her gun and perforated the lawman's J.B. hat as he ran for his own horse. He took after her and a running gun-battle ensued for the next five miles.

Finally his horse overtook Little Breeches' mount, but she twisted him aside and charged into a thicket. To stop her Bill was forced to shoot her horse. She swung on the law like lightning and fired point blank at him as he charged up. It was a certainty that she would have killed him. But her gun clicked empty on that shot.

He dismounted and tried to handcuff her. Like Burke, he had a fight on his hands. She tore into him desperately, clawing up his face painfully with her nails. It required a hefty sock on the jaw to subdue her.

It was a sad pair of deputies who racked into Canadian City with their prisoners. Dishevelled, scratched and bloody, Steve and Bill had to face the whole town's taunts and jeers. They took their punishment with smiles and hurried their prisoners to Muskogee. The two girls refused to give any information about the Doolins, however. But through Parson Steve's kindly efforts, the court was lenient with them. Instead of sending them to prison, Judge A. G. Bierer, who presided over the district, sentenced them to the Farmington

N. H. Rose

Cattle Annie and Little Breeches taken at the time of their capture by Marshals Burke and Tilghman.

Reformatory in Massachusetts, far enough away to keep them from the Doolins.

Little Breeches died there of tuberculosis and Cattle Annie returned to Oklahoma years later after her release. But she found a different Oklahoma. The Doolins were gone and so were the rest of her owl hoot pards. She settled down to a quiet life and lived respectably thereafter. It is reported that she is still living there. If so, this writer would be grateful to hear from her that together we might clear up certain hazy chapters in Oklahoma's colorful history.

But with the arrest of the girl desperadoes, Burke's tasks were by no means finished. Events followed rapidly. With nobody to tip off the Doolins concerning the activities of the officers, Burke, Tilghman, Madsen and Thomas were able to account for a long string of arrests and killings.

Tilghman chopped down Little Bill shortly after the girls were arrested. He went on Doolin's personal trail while Burke went out to get a notorious killer who had been terrorizing Enid. He was Zip Wyatt alias Dick Yeager. He was bad. Regularly ordained lead-slingers were content to laugh when he laughed and to hunt holes when he frowned.

But he wasn't too tough for Steve Burke. None of them were. He gathered together a small posse of farmers and took after Mr. Wyatt. But Zip eluded the farmers and was brought to bay shortly after by Burke himself not far from Enid. Wyatt did not live long afterward. He kicked his traces on a cot on August 4th, 1895.

Death howled long and mournfully thereafter on the heels of the wild bunch. One after the other of them went down before the blazing guns of Heck Thomas, Madsen, Tilghman, Ledbetter, Steve Burke and others who had joined the law for keeps. Finally Tilghman put the irons on Doolin himself and marched him off to jail at Guthrie. This was in December, 1895.

On the heels of Tilghman's bold stroke in breaking the back of outlawry in the territory, Burke was appointed to succeed Nix as Managing Deputy. This appointment placed him in full charge of all the other deputies in the district. He drove them hard, not that they needed it.

Then came the dragging down of George Wrightman, alias Red Buck. Burke left his desk to go with Tilghman on the hunt that led to this outlaw's death at Arapaho. Thereafter the outlaws were kept on the run. They never stopped. Nor did the officers. In the years that Burke was head deputy of the district, they made a record that stands today for wholesale arrests.

On the evening of July 6th, 1896, Doolin made a bold break from the Guthrie jail. He shot his way out. For a time it appeared that he would make good his escape from the state. But Burke and his fellow officers again took up his trail. They followed him to Lawson. There they started closing in on him.

But it was Captain Heck Thomas who won the distinction of having "filled Doolin so full of buckshot that he looked like a sieve!" This happened shortly after his break from Guthrie. Heck and the other lawmen closed all roads and trails about Lawson. It was Burke's idea. He was sure the desperado would use one of the roads. He did. The one Heck had staked off.

He came along driving a wagon. Thomas stepped out and ordered him to throw up his hands. Doolin did, but one of them had a gun in it. Thomas was armed with a shotgun. He let the outlaw have both barrels, killing him instantly.

The fate of the Doolin Gang was sealed. Bill Dalton had been killed in June, 1894. Little Bill had fallen under Tilghman's gun. In July, 1896, Charlie Pierce and Bitter Creek Newcomb were killed through the strategy of Burke, Thomas and Tilghman who had arranged with two ranchers

known as undercover agents to bring them to justice. The names of these men have long since floundered, but they are credited with having blasted Pierce and Newcomb into eternity with shotguns.

Tulsa Jack, whose real name was Jack Blake, was killed by Chris Madsen following a hold-up of a Rock Island train at Dover on May 5th, 1895. But with the death of Doolin, organized outlawry in Oklahoma was on the down grade. So diligent was Burke at the helm of the marshal's office that outlaws feared to strike within his district. A few gangs had tried it, but they encountered swift retribution.

Burke took personal action in many cases following his appointment to the post of Managing Deputy. He never allowed a desk to hold him down. He took part in the running down of the Al Jennings Gang. Bud Ledbetter actually brought about the arrest of Jennings, however, and nipped his short career in the bud.

The Buck Gang Is Broken

In 1895 he played an important part in the downfall of the infamous Buck Gang, led by Rufus Buck. In this gang were such hard characters as Luckey Davis, Maomi July, Harris Davis and Sam Sampson. This outfit sprang up near Okmulgee and flourished as a band for exactly three weeks. But in that time they terrorized the Indian Territory most thoroughly. They were not only killers and road agents of the meanest calibre, but raped every woman they encountered.

On July 28th, 1895, they killed a deputy marshal at Okmulgee. Rufus Buck himself performed that deed. Burke and many other lawmen tracked the killer and his henchmen down and staged a bloody hand-to-hand fight with them. Men were killed on both sides, but Rufus Buck was captured. He was hustled to Fort Smith where he was hanged on July 1st, 1896.

Many tales of Burke's prowess as a gun-fighting lawman are spun even today in Oklahoma. A good many of them are more or less fiction, built up around a few scant facts. On the other hand, some of them are true. But with the passing of time even the truth can become distorted and it is difficult to sift the wheat from the chaff, particularly when it concerns a lawman of Burke's breed.

Such men made many enemies on both sides of the law. They will ridicule a true story and sometimes tell one of derogatory nature about the officer in question. This was borne out when we endeavored to learn what had become of Burke following his resignation from the marshal's office in 1897 after four long years of hard, bloody work fighting for posterity.

One story says that Steve resigned to take up evangelistic work exclusively and that he traveled throughout the country winning many thousands of converts.

Another says that he was forced to resign, following which he took to drinking. Then he is said to have fallen in with a bunch of loose characters and went from bad to worse. But in the light of his record as a conscientious lawman, a stickler for duty, we are inclined to favor the former story that he lived straight and honorable following his resignation.

He was not the type of man to willingly bog himself in the mire of drunkenness and bad company. Whether he is living or dead today cannot be learned, it appears. But his career was indeed a strange one—a six-gun sky-pilot on Sunday, a lead-slinging marshal on Monday. Our article here is based on mouldy records and tales handed down from those wild days. We have endeavored to give what we believe to be facts. If Steve Burke is still among the living, we would appreciate his reactions in order that we might obtain a more detailed and worthy record of his colorful life.

GUN SHY

by

JAY J. KALEZ

It Took More Than A Live Man To Make Him Break His Promise To A Dead Man

"I called you in, Steve," "Damit" Merrick, the grizzly old owner of the Walking W outfit began as he eyed the lanky hand that stood before him, "to tell you I'm right proud of the way you took over the roundup crew and handled things after Gord Jenkins was . . . was . . . After Gord checked in," Damit finally finished.

If Damit Merrick had said, "After Gord Jenkins was drygulched down in the scabrock brakes," he would have expressed his true conviction of what had happened to his top-hand and wagon boss the last week of the spring roundup. As it was, the set of Damit's bearded jaw was insinuation enough.

The tall, lanky hand standing before the veteran cattleman shifted weight awkwardly. Despite his weather-beaten Stetson and dust-caked chaps, there was something oddly lacking about the make-up of the slim puncher. But for the studded belt of his chaps, his hips were bare. He wore neither holster nor cartridge belt. Only the silver studs of his chap-belt ornamented his hip line.

"What I really called you in to say,"

They looked up on the rimrock in time to see Buck shot.

the owner of the Walking W continued, "was I'll be namin' a new top-hand to handle the shippin' herd on in to the Junction. I was wonderin' if you might have some ideas on who's fit for the job?"

Again the lanky hand shifted weight. "That's right kind of you, askin' my say-so, boss," he mumbled. "Reckon, ain't a a one in the whole darned crew wouldn't go to hell for you, you pointed the way. I'm thinkin' though, if I was pickin' a hand to fill Gord's shoes on my own hook, I'd cut Buck Davis out of the layout. He knows the range, is right handy with cattle and . . . and right handy with a gun . . . things requirin' such."

Steve Brandon had allowed his voice to drop with his last few words. Old man Merrick's face took on a slight glow.

"Damn it, Steve," he blasted in his usual brusqueness. "I was hopin' you'd take the job yourself. I don't know what your reason is for shyin' clear of packin' a gun like it was packin' poison, but the way things are shapin' themselves in these parts, I need a top-hand that's jest what you say, right handy with a gun. You get to the bunkhouse, you can tell Buck Davis I'm wantin' to see him. An' if I wasn't needin' you to point that trail-herd, damn me if I wouldn't pay you off and send you scootin' off this range 'fore some gun-hand takes advantage of your crazy notions and tacks up your hide. There's trouble comin', Steve. Gun trouble."

Steve's face was sober as he left the ranch house and started for the corrals. Old man Merrick's words had cut. Not since the day three years back when he had nosed on to the Saltese range, had anyone ever seen him touch his hand to a gun. On the range, at the home corrals, in town, he always rode unarmed. Some joshing hands had tried to make a joke of the trait. No joke seemed to fit the bold attempt Steve carried for any rumpus he might walk into. There was something behind the silent puncher's refusal to carry or touch his hand to a six-shooter. Something that only Steve himself knew.

It was after the bunkhouse celebration that night, in honor of Buck Davis's appointment to top-hand and trail boss of the shipping herd drive, due to start for the railroad corrals at the Junction with daylight, that Steve eased over to the little private room at the end of the bunkshack. Buck Davis himself answered Steve's knock.

"What th' hell you knockin' for, Steve?" Buck queried with a frown. "Me bein' trail-boss and ratin' this private stall ain't makin' that kinda difference 'tween you and me."

Steve grinned weakly. "I was jest thinkin', Buck," he offered soberly, "the way things is shapin' and after what happened to Gord Jenkins, it's a pretty safe bet there's gonna be trouble 'fore that trail-herd hits the Junction corrals. Reckon Zeke Scadden and that Triple O outfit of his'n, would give a lot to see something happen so the old man couldn't make payment on his leased range for next season. Things smellin' gun-smoke, I was thinkin' you might want me to stay here and tend corrals, 'stead of trailin' with the herd. Bein' as I'm not packin' a shootin' iron, I wouldn't be much use in case . . ."

Buck Davis slapped his hand across Steve's back. "You wasn't my pardner, damned if I wouldn't start bootin' your pant-seat," Buck cut in. "Gun-hands are right cheap to hire, Steve, but trail-wise cow-hands is scarcer than hen teeth. You're ridin' point on that herd, pardner. And when we get them critters loaded, I got a little sumpin' I been gonna tell you for a long while. Sumpin' personal, kinda."

At daylight next morning, Steve pointed the way for the thousand herd of grass-fat steers that made up the Walking W shipping herd. Old man Merrick had pulled out with the chuck-wagon outfit an hour before. Not till late afternoon, did

a distant thin spiral of smoke signal the herd owner's location. Old Merrick had picked their first night-camp in a wide canyon just below a waterhole. Already the chuck-wagon was set and its dutch ovens going. The day's drive had carried them a good half way to their shipping point.

Buck Davis ordered the herd bedded down well back from camp. In an hour, the peacefulness of the open-range night settled. Only the occasional yap of a coyote marred the quiet. As the men started crawling into their bed-rolls, Steve started for the horse line.

"Reckon I'll sorta meander 'round the herd once 'fore I roll in," Steve explained to the night-hawk at the picket line as he

"Sounds like they're sorta sniffin' for a scent of home range," Steve offered as he caught the blow of some of the animals on the edge of the herd. "Reckon they'll be quietin' down shortly."

"Hope so," the night hand called as Steve moved off. "Buck was jest makin' the rounds. He figgered the same way. Only thing, Buck didn't like the way them kiotes was yippin'. Figgered they must be feastin' on a carcass somewhere up on the rim."

As Steve moved in a slow circle of the herd the nervous snorts of the animals, clearing their nostrils for a more positive scent of the night air, grew louder. Steve studied the canyon rim ahead, toward

Blood In The Air

mounted up. "Them kiotes is kinda yappin' mean tonight."

"Everything goes like she did today, 'spect we'll be yappin' a dang-site louder when we hit the shippin' corrals tomorrow night," the night-hawk called back. "Louder an' meaner."

Fifteen minutes later, Steve rode silently up on one of the night herders. The hand was standing in his stirrups, staring at the distant canyon rim, where a great full moon was just tipping the rugged break.

"Right glad you rode 'round, Steve," the hand called in the usual cautious tone of a night herder. "Sumpin' damn queer 'bout them critters yonder. First time I ever seen a herd gettin' spooky 'bout a moon climbin' over a rim. Look at 'em."

Steve had already noticed the uneasiness of the herd. They had refused to bed down despite their weariness from the day's long trail. There was little bawling but every head seemed to be lifted in a suspicious gaze towards the great ball of yellow creeping higher in the night's opalescent skies.

which every critter seemed to point a wary eye. Suddenly, he turned his horse and angled down canyon towards a narrow bench that seemed to lead up to the rim. Those yapping coyotes above seemed to be getting a bit too bold.

Fifteen minutes' riding brought Steve almost to the crest of the rim. The narrow, shelf-like bench had held a trail that climbed the canyon side and now ran along a step in the perpendicular wall of rock a dozen feet or so below the rim.

Abruptly, Steve jerked reins. With halt of his horse, sound of the now bawling herd below, drifted up. Now the frantic bellowing of the herd stiffened Steve in his saddle. Cautiously he sniffed of the night breeze that floated over the rim and down into the canyon. A queer scent, sickening sweet, was in the air. With the first tinge of his nostrils, Steve recognized the odor. Blood. Warm blood. In the damp night air, the scent carried like a ghastly perfume.

Steve leaned in his saddle and searched the wall beside him for some possible ap-

proach to the rim. He knew now what had caused the nervous snorts of the herd below to change to a panicky bawl. The down-breeze from the rim was carrying the blood scent down to the canyon bottom.

Hardly had Steve leaned in his saddle, then his ears caught a trickling sound. A sound as of water splashing across rocks. He leaned the farther in his saddle. His body jerked. On the rim, the outline of a man loomed against the moon-lit skies. He seemed to pop up as from nowhere. An instant and a second form straightened, a dozen feet away.

"Take it easy there fellah." A sharp voice sang out from above. "Whatcha pourin 'over them rocks mister?"

As one of the pair on the rim partly turned, Steve was positive of the demanding voice above. Buck Davis was on the rim. Steve caught the glitter of the gun Buck held hip-high. Beyond him, the hand he had hailed was starting to lift his arms.

Steve muttered a curse behind his lips, as the plot of the lifting-armed hand on the rim leaped clear. Someone had been about to stampede the herd below. The nervous cattle stirred to a panicky pitch by the scent of fresh blood, it would take little to start them on a mad race across the badlands. Buck had been suspicious of those yapping coyotes, the same as he. Buck, however, had managed to locate a trail that took him to the rim.

Some inner sense of warning caused Steve's upward gaze to suddenly shift. Steve's right palm slapped the leather at his hip even before he realized the uselessness of it. Two silent forms were rising out of the rocks a few yards on along the rim. Buck's back was to the pair. Steve saw a gun in the hand of one of the pair level down.

"Buck! Lookout! Behind you!"

Steve blasted his warning shout towards the rim. His words were drowned in the thundering roar of a shot. Even as a tongue of flame flashed from the pointed gun muzzle behind Buck, Steve saw the Walking W's new foreman spin and cave. His body melted into the black rocks at the rim's edge.

In the canyon below, the rumbling echo of that single shot seemed to have set up a thundering roar a thousand times greater. There was the wild, terrified bellow of milling cattle. Tangling horns crashed. Stamping hoofs rumbled. Then, like the mounting thunder of a charging avalanche, the herd broke. Charged blindly down the canyon towards the waterhole where the outfit's chuck-wagon fire still glowed. The stampede was on.

In the inky blackness of the canyon wall step a dozen feet below the rim, Steve hurled curses into the night. A wild fury swept him. He pounded his fists to the bare leather of his hips.

"Gawd, Jim," he moaned into the darkness. "Ain't I paid enough for what I done to you, pardner. I promised you when you lay dyin' there, that I'd never lay my hand to another gun. I killed you pardner, 'cause I didn't know. Look what my promise is doin'. It's made me stand by and watch a pardner jest like you, Jim, go down with a slug in his back 'cause I . . . cause I . . ."

A sudden commanding hush seemed to clamp the mumbling words behind Steve's lips. He crouched forward. He twisted his head up. Even above the thundering roar of the stampeded herd below, a chuckling laugh sounded from the rim above.

"Dios mio," a purring foreign voice called. "Look like maybeso we do whatcha call 'em good job, eh?"

"That nosey hand used his gun 'stead of his mouth, I wouldn't be knowin' it," came the snorted retort. "Where'd you drop him, Smokey?"

"Over the rim, reckon," a throaty voice called back. "I heard him yelp when he

went over. Co'mon. We can't use time on him. We got tracks to make. This gun-play means old Sheriff Tuttle 'll be buttin' his nose in like he did on that wagon-boss of this outfit we drygulched."

Below the rim, Steve heard the voices fade. He did not move. A queer fire was burning through his brain. To himself he was repeating the words he had heard from above. Burning into his brain each voice. Three men . . . a Mex . . . Smokey . . . a throaty voice, made up the killing trio. Buck was dead. His own warning cry had been mistaken for Buck's death cry as he tumbled over the rim.

The trio had not planned on gun-play. That brought in the law. Sheriff Tuttle. . . . Steve's blood seemed to warm with a flash of hope. Sheriff Tuttle . . . he was more than a hope. He was redemption and revenge in one.

Steve whirled his mount. Back down the ledge trail he raced. From far across the badlands came the distant rumble of the stampeded herd. He could give no aid there. It would be daylight before any of the crew could get back to investigate the shooting on the rim. They would find Buck's body in the canyon below. By daylight he would know the trio of killers that had sent it hurling there. Knowing them was all he asked. After that . . .

A half hour later, Steve raced his mount over the edge of the rim trail he had been forced to descend to the canyon bottom to locate. On the rim, the moonlight painted a perfect picture of the stampeding plot. Just back from the rim lay the carcass of a horse. Evidently it had been knocked in the head and its throat cut to catch its draining life blood in a dented pail that lay nearby. The rocks were stained with the crimson splashes, scattered about to carry its terrifying scent to the cattle below.

Quickly, Steve located where the killer trio had ground-hitched their horses. He studied the hoof tracks. One awkward shaped hoof was a perfect trail sign. Steve circled wide as he headed away from the rim.

The moon was dropping low on the distant hills and still Steve held to his trail. He followed it by guess now, on through a broken stretch of scab-rock. Abruptly, he dropped down into a high-walled coulee. The inky-black shadows closed about. The crimson spurt from a rifle muzzle was Steve's first warning of the three pairs of eyes that had watched him descend.

Steve's mount squealed and stumbled as he attempted to wheel it about. It was hit. Bravely the little animal struggled to respond to the jerk of its rein. A dozen leaps towards the coulee wall and it stumbled again. Steve kicked his stirrups free. His mount was going down under him.

Lead rained about Steve. Flame belching gun muzzles stabbed the blackness. The choking scream of Steve's dying horse added to the din. Steve's heels hit dirt. His speed hurled him forward. In against the scatter of rocks at the coulee base, he went sprawling.

A trotting horse thumped ground a dozen feet from where Steve lay crouched amongst the rocks. "Reckon that first shot got 'im, Smokey," the throaty voice sang out. "Here's his hoss. We sure blasted it to hell."

"Dios Mio! Why we wait?" the whining foreign voice cut in impatiently. "Maybeso somebody he come. You tink des fellah no dead he no be usin' hees gun?"

Mention of Steve not having fired an answer to the ambusher's volley, seemed to satisfy the searchers. Down the coulee they headed. Still crouched in the rocks, Steve listened to their fading hoof-beats. Listened as his hands pressed his gunless hips. The sun dipped to send its long shadows stretching across the heat-baked alkali. Still Steve held to the trail he had

again picked up alongside his dead mount in the coulee bottom. Now as the long shadows deepened into dusk, Steve felt the soothing thrill to his day's tortures. Far ahead blinked the beckoning lights of a little town. From his first glance as he topped a broken rise, he knew it was the Junction. The killer trio had circled wide through the badlands to cover their tracks. So too had Steve.

It was long after dark that Steve located old Sheriff Tuttle in his tiny office behind the jail at the edge of the Junction. The sheriff's brow gathered as he listened to Steve's story.

"It's Zeke Scadden's hired killers got Buck all right," the sheriff finally ground out. "I been smellin' trouble ever since Zeke and his outfit hit town, two days ago. Reckon we'll jest have to wait, Steve. I'll be needin' some help when I call Scadden's hand. My deputies are up on the reservation shaggin' a pair of horse-thieves. They oughta be driftin' back about mornin', then . . ."

"By mornin' them killer's 'll be outa the country," Steve cut in. "Reckon they've only drifted this way to collect their pay and cover their tracks. I'm callin' for a showdown, now sheriff. I"m only askin' you to say the word."

A puzzled look crossed the sheriff's face. "Can't say I quite get your meanin', Steve," the sheriff stammered. "Every one of Zeke Scadden's hands is gonna back his play to the limit. If you was kinda handy with a gun yourself, Steve, I might swear you in and force the play. Things as they is, I'm thinkin' . . ."

Steve's eyes seemed to gather a smoldering flame. His thin lips set. "Sheriff," he drawled in a toneless voice. "When a man makes a promise, reckon that promise holds long as he can kick dirt. If the law should say different though, I'm thinkin' a fellah would sorta have to swallow his promise to fit the law. That's what I'm askin' you to do, sheriff. You deputize me to back the law, reckon 'cordin' to all things regular, my promise to never touch hand to a gun is sorta outlawed for the occasion."

An instant the sheriff studied the man before him. Then without a word he reached into the drawer of his desk and dug out a deputy's star. A nod and Steve raised his right hand. There in the dimness of his office, he swore Steve in as a deputy. A minute later Steve was buckling a brace of heavy Colts about his hips. Carefully he tested their draw. The sheriff watched the smoothness with which Steve handled the weapons. Abruptly Steve turned and lead the way out of the office to the street.

Not until they had reached the hitching rack before the Ram Horn saloon, did Steve speak. The hitching rack was jammed with Triple O horses. From inside the saloon came the bellowing shouts of its bar-crowd. Steve touched the sheriff's arm.

"I ain't tryin' to run things, Sheriff," Steve spoke in a hollow whisper. "I'm thinkin', if you say it's legal, it'd be better I played a lone hand 'til the showdown. Scadden's hands won't be regardin' me for much right off. They may sorta declare themselves on a few things they wouldn't be sayin' if you was about. You hole in right close and keep your ears lifted . . ."

Sheriff Tuttle nodded knowingly. Steve moved towards the swinging doors. The sheriff waited until he had entered, then quickly slid along the outside wall to an open window. Inside, Steve was crossing to the bar.

A queer silence settled over the place as Steve pushed towards the bar end. In the crowd, the two guns swung low on his hip seemed to pass unnoticed.

Near the end of the bar, Steve glimpsed Zeke Scadden, the owner of the Triple O outfit, eyeing him suspiciously. The very

entrance of a Walking W hand into the place seemed to command the challenging hush. Steve saw Zeke Scadden nod towards a card table at the side of the bar room. Instantly, a burly hand in a calf-skin vest, lifted himself from the table and hurried forward. A slim, lanky man trailed him. Even as Steve shifted a step, so as to keep the pair well sighted in the mirror behind the bar, he saw a pock-faced Mexican move up to join the pair.

Steve's lips were bloodless as he ordered a drink. Without hearing their voices, he was sure of the trio alongside Zeke Scadden. The calf-skin vest of one hand was still caked with the alkali dust of the badland trail.

Steve had barely poured his drink when the man with the calf-skin vest came pushing his way through the crowd. Boldly he shouldered in alongside Steve at the bar. His one hand jerked Steve about to face him.

"What's that tick-eaten boss of yours do, cowhand?" the man beside Steve blasted in his face so all about might hear. "Does he hire you to scout trail for him into place where he ain't got nerve nuff to send a he man that packs shootin' irons?"

Steve's lips cracked in an icy grin. "Not 'zactly, stranger," he sang back, his voice as loud as the Triple O gun-hand's blast. "He sends me ahead scoutin' skunks. Two-legged skunks that can't blink across a gun-sight 'less it's aimin' at a man's back. Skunks that stampedes a man's herd, then high-tails it for the badland trails. Right dusty them trails, eh mister? Your fancy vest there's a showin' it."

The jaws of the man alongside Steve, sagged. He gulped for words.

"Why you . . . you . . ." his face contorted as he stammered. "Listen cowhand," he finally managed to snarl. "I ain't drawin' on yellow rats that don't pack a gun to back there words. But I'm callin' your hand right now. You can pack gun-talk words, you can pack a gun. I'm forcin' this play. Get your fist on a gun butt, 'cause I'm killin' you 'fore you leave this hole."

Steve's position at the bar had concealed his hips. From the killer's words, Steve knew Zeke Scadden had passed the information that he never carried a gun. The Triple O hired killer, believed himself really forcing Steve's hand. His chest swelled as he glared about.

Steve barely straightened at the bar. "I'm waitin' skunk," he drawled off softly.

"Do Your Talking Through Gun-Smoke!"

"Do your talkin' through gun-smoke, 'cause after I kill you I'm callin' the hand of your two belly-louse friends yonder, Smokey and that Mex. Case you're wonderin' how I knows names, I'm the hand you shot the hoss out from under back yonder in the scab-rock coulee last night. I been trackin' you and your litter afoot, ever since. Ever since you back shot my pardner when he jumped you gettin' ready to stampede our herd from the rim. Compre, mister?"

The killer in the calf-skin vest took a quick step back. His eyes caught sight of the brace of guns swung low on Steve's hips. His own hand dived for his hip. Steve never moved. It was not the man before him he was watching. It was his two partners alongside Zeke Scadden at the end of the bar.

The Mex had eased a step away from Scadden. The lanky man beside him was turning sideways to the bar. Steve knew the play that was in the making. Knew

and measured it, even as he glimpsed the Colt in the hands of the killer before him, tip holster leather.

Steve seemed to pivot on his heels. His body lurched to the side. A gun appeared in his hand like magic. Its muzzle blasted a flame spurt down the length of the bar. In the same instant, Steve kicked out with his one boot. His sharp heel caught the knee-cap of the man in calf-skin vest. Force of the blow jerked the killer in against the bar even as his gun swung up. Steve's free hand lashed out to jerk him closer. From beneath the killer's very arm-pit, Steve's Colt blast another spurt of flame down the bar's length.

At the end of the bar, the pock-faced Mexican stiffened and spun crazily on the balls of his feet. Beside him, the man Smokey was caving awkwardly across the top of the bar. Both pawed to lift higher the guns they gripped. Both clutched to hold their feet.

At Steve's side, the man in the calf-skin vest was clawing at the bar's edge. A queer expression contorted his face. A ghastly expression as thin bubbles of blood began to foam from his mouth. Slowly he sank down.

Steve's second gun had leaped into his hand. Back to the bar he poised ready for any sign of further gun-play. A commanding blast from the doors of the saloon, broke the tense stillness. "Hold it everybody," Sheriff Tuttle's voice thundered. "I'm takin' charge here. Them as go for guns go for trouble."

The man in the calf-skin vest had dropped into a sprawl at Steve's feet. Suddenly, Zeke Scadden pushed away from the end of the bar. He shouldered his way to the sheriff.

"There's your man Sheriff," Scadden bellowed. "We got witnesses aplenty. Cold blooded murder. He killed three of my hands here without givin' them a chance. You callin' your law to take care of things, get busy 'fore I turn my men loose."

Sheriff Tuttle only tilted his gun a bit higher. "Them three of your hired hands layin' there, Scadden?" he demanded solemnly. "They from your outfit?"

"I'm sayin' they're my hands, ain't I?" Scadden fired back angrily. "An' I'm backin' 'em to see things is evened."

"There evenin' right now Scadden," the sheriff ground out. "Hand over your shootin' irons. Them three hands was wanted for killin' Gord Jenkins and for stampeding a Walkin' W herd last night. You hired 'em Scadden, reckon you can do the explainin' on what you hired 'em for. Put your hands up Zeke."

Zeke Scadden's eyes blazed. He swept a glance about for a sign of support. Steve's two guns covered the bar crowd.

"What about that murderin' snake?" Scadden blasted with a jerk of his head towards Steve. "You lettin' a murderer accuse me?"

"Lettin' one of my deputies accuse you, Scadden," the sheriff shot back. "You bend your neck there you'll see that killer hand of yours is bleedin' from the back anyway. Dig out that slug and I'm thinkin' you'll be findin' it's one of your other pair of hired killers gun-dropped this man. I saw the play. Steve was . . ."

The wild beat of horse hoofs in the street outside flashed a warning glance between the sheriff and Steve. A dozen or more riders were jerking up at the hitching rail before the saloon. Zeke Scadden's lips tightened with the sound. He swept a signaling glare to the men about him.

"You're askin' for it Sheriff. You're goin' to get it," Scadden ground out. "Them's my men comin'. I ain't sayin' what they'll do when they learns you're backin' a murderer's hand. A . . ."

Spurs jingled in the doorway. The sheriff and Steve faced half around. About

the bar room, hands eased towards guns. They waited only for Zeke Scadden's signal to back his play.

A dust-caked figure bolted through the swinging doors. He carried a ready gun in his hand. Behind him trailed a dozen men. One glance about and he eased towards the sheriff. At the bar, Steve blinked unbelievingly as he stared at the advancing leader. The hand edging towards the sheriff was Buck Davis.

"We're backing your play, Sheriff," Buck sang out. "Just heard down at the corrals there was a Walkin' W hand in trouble."

"Thanks, Buck," the sheriff only mumbled as with a quick jerk he frisked Zeke Scadden of his guns and pushed him forward. "My deputy and me here figgered there might be trouble, but reckon these galoots is kinda changed their minds. Co'mon, Steve. We'll be lockin' this gent up for a spell. Start movin' Scadden."

With the sheriff's words Buck Davis sighted Steve. A minute the two men only stared at each other. "Lawd, Buck," Steve finally managed to speak. "I . . . I thought them back-shootin' snakes got you. I . . . I tried to holler, but . . . but . . ."

"I heard you, Steve," Back cut in with a grin. "That's why I was just turnin' when that slug nicked my ear and laid me out colder than a sledged steer. When I come to, I hit back to where the boys had got the herd to millin' and never got a chance to tally on you 'til mornin'. I didn't figger you'd hit the trail, 'til . . ."

Buck and Steve had trailed the sheriff and his prisoner on out of the saloon. Now they stood alone in the darkness of the street. Steve's hand caught of Buck's arm.

"Sumpin' I got to be tellin' you, Buck," he stammered. "Sumpin' so you'll be understandin'. I had a pardner once over Pecos way. Him and me was raised together. I was kinda hot-headed them days and quick at goin' for a gun before askin' questions. I . . ."

Buck gave Steve a resounding slap on the shoulder. "Hell, pardner," he exploded. "You ain't tryin' to tell me what I been knowin' since I set eyes on you? That Pecos pardner of yours was makin' horse-play one night and shoved a gun in your back thinkin' to scare you. 'Fore you know'd different you'd whipped a slug under your arm and killed him dead. First day I hit that Pecos country, I heard 'bout how hard you took things and how'd you'd taken some kinda promise never to lay your hands on a shootin' iron again. I knew how things was, Steve, all along, but I didn't want to go talkin', figgerin' you was anxious 'bout forgettin'. Only thing I did wanta do was sorta chin with you sometime on those old timers down Pecos way. I was raised from a kid in them parts, pardner. A mangy infant."

In the darkness beyond the hitching rack, two men clasped hands. Steve swallowed hard as he felt the rub of the deputy's badge he wore. The brace of guns on his hips seemed to nestle snug. He had lived out his promise of the Pecos country. He had another partner from Pecos way now. A partner that would be needing the backing of his gun hand. He could give it now.

Talk about speed—Mr. Yooly had it, but at that he wasn't able to carry Uncle Bootsy Peckleberry across The Grand Canyon in one jump! Enjoy this rip-roaring, laugh packed yarn.

MR. YOOLY

By S. OMAR BARKER

A SIDE-SPLITTING PLAYFUL AND BEELINER NOVEL

by NORRELL GREGORY

Playful was loading some barrels of salt into the wagon when the sheriff came stomping down the platform. Playful didn't see the sheriff at first and went right on hurling those four hundred pound barrels into the box.

The sheriff stopped to watch him, a light of wonder in his eyes. Playful was built like a stud horse—that is, all but his head. It looked like a walnut setting in a notch between two shelves of rock that were Playful's shoulders. He was handling those salt barrels as if they were empty.

After he had lifted the last barrel the sheriff tapped him on the shoulder. The sheriff had to reach up quite a ways to do that, and he was not a small man by any means. Playful looked around.

"Has your boss got a brother?" asked the sheriff.

Playful scratched his bullet-like poll.

Sheepman's

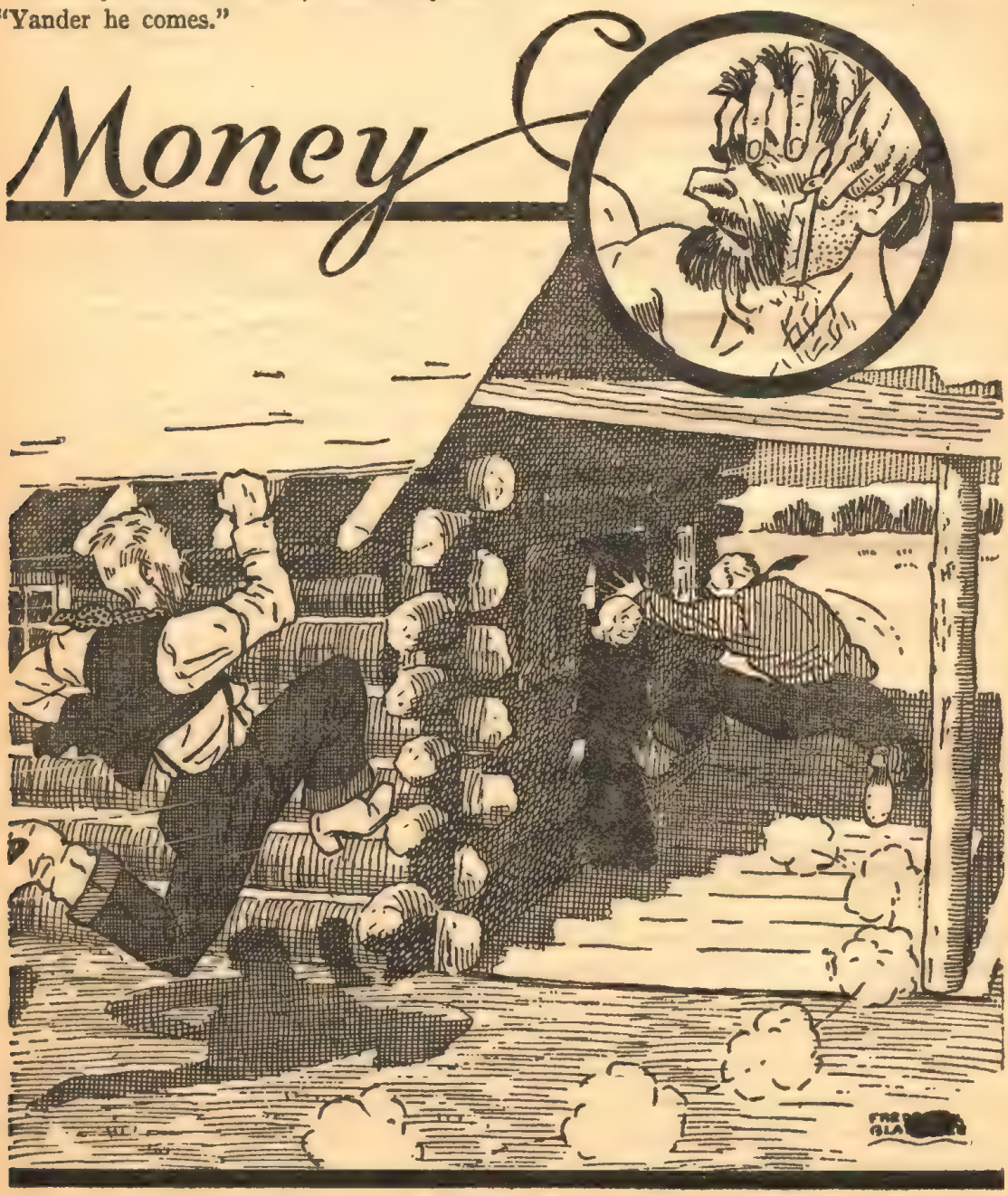
When Playful And Beeliner Took On The Job Of Roaching Shanty Funcannon's Beard, They Had Some Plumb Rapid Moving To Do To Find Out Which End Of The Funeral They Would End Up On

"Damned if I know, sheriff," he said cheerfully. "What do you say?"

"I'm askin' *you*," said the sheriff.

"Mebby Beeliner knows," said Playful. "Yander he comes."

The sheriff turned just as Beeliner came ambling out of the freight depot. He was fully as tall as Playful and looked twice as tall because he was so thin. He was as thin as a piece of stretched whang. His head, however, was all out of proportion with the rest of him. It looked for all the world like a huge knotty pumpin stuck on a broomstick which was Beeliner's neck. About the center of his neck there was an enlargement as big as Playful's fist. It slid up and down when he swallowed.



"Beeliner," said Playful, "do you reckon th' boss has got a brother?"

Beeliner swallowed. Looked at the sheriff with his big mournful eyes.

"Would a uncle do?" he asked in his rolling bass.

"This hombre says he's Shanty's brother," replied the sheriff. "I figgered he was a liar. He looks like Shanty, though."

"What hombre, sheriff?" asked Playful.

"Feller I got in the cooler. Blowed in here th' other day and run up a bill over't Clamp Dobey's place. Didn't have no money so he told Clamp t' charge it to Shanty. Clamp had me arrest him."

"You reckon we'd better look at his year marks, Beeliner?" asked Playful.

"I reckon we had," Beeliner wagged his big head. "He might be th' boss's brother at that."

The sheriff conducted them over to the little jail and unlocked the door. A shortish, oldish man with a chin that just missed the tip of his nose hopped up from a bench. He had a stubble of reddish grey bristles all over his face and looked pretty thin to the boys—like he hadn't been eating any too well. His eyes were bright and blue, though, and he grinned when he looked at them. He didn't have a tooth in his head.

Playful eyed him speculatively.

"Does kinda look like th' boss, don't he, Beeliner?" he said.

"If he had some meat on him he would," replied Beeliner.

"And 'nother tooth er two," said Playful. "Podner, what did you say your name wuz?"

"My name is Funcannon—Bill Funcannon. Own brother to Shanty. I come clear out here to this country t' visit him and how does they receive me? I gets throwed in th' cooler! I aim to raise hell about this way of treatment. I won't stand for it, an' neither will Shanty. He's my own blood brother—"

"How much does he owe Clamp, Sheriff?" asked Beeliner.

"Go ask Clamp," replied the sheriff. "You'll have to get a release from him before I'll turn this hombre loose."

Beeliner looked at Playful. "What'll we do?" he asked him.

"Let's go see Clamp," said Playful promptly. "If he's drunk up all Clamp's likker, I say he ort to be hung. Here we ain't been t' town fer six months and this damn oleander comes in and drinks up all—"

"I said he run a bill—I never said he'd drunk up all Clamp's likker," said the sheriff. "You go see Clamp. If he says let him loose, I'll do it, providin' you take him outa town and keep him out."

They went over to Clamp Dobey's place. Clamp stood and looked at them with his under jaw sticking away out past his nose.

"Bad sign!" hissed Playful. "He looks sour as hell, don't he?"

"What th' hell you mean juggin' boss's relation, Clamp?" said Playful.

Beeliner wagged his head.

Clamp leveled a blunt forefinger at him.

"If he *is* relation to Shanty you tell Shanty I said he'd better git over here and take keer of his pore relations er I'll take at least one of 'em outa circulation fer a while."

"You ain't got no proof he's any relation t' th' boss," said Playful. "He jist claims he is. I don't—"

"You know danm well he's who he claims he is!" yelped Clamp. "If he had a little meat on him and some teeth in his gums you couldn't hardly tell 'em apart. I don't aim t' stand fer it. He owes me seventeen dollars and forty cents—"

Playful drew Beeliner aside. "How much you got on you, Beeliner?"

"Jist a sawbuck," said Beeliner.

"Give it to me," said Playful briskly. "I got enough t' make up th' difference. We can't let th' boss's brother lay in that buggy old jail—"

"But damn it, Playful, we ain't even had a drink yit!" protested Beeliner. "We ort t' git a drink outa this anyhow."

Playful counted his money. Payment of the fine would leave them with a lone dime.

"We gotta git him outa that jail," he said. "Boss'll raise hell if we go home and—"

Beeliner accosted Clamp.

"If we pay his bill you 'low us a per cent?" he asked.

"How much per cent?" asked Clamp suspiciously.

" 'Bout two quart," said Beeliner.

Clamp let out a yelp of protest.

"Take all my profit! I'll give you two pint."

Playful saw they had Clamp.

"Two quart er nothin'," he said. "He may not be th' boss's brother a-tall, then you won't git nothin'. But we'll take a chance he is—fer two quart, won't we, Beeliner?"

Beeliner licked his lips with a tongue as long as a cow's and wagged his head.

Clamp grumbled some more, but he gave in at length. They paid him and he handed over two bottles of Red Eye and made out, at Beeliner's request, a release for Brother Bill Funcannon.

Playful grinned as they strode back towards the jail.

"Come outa that purty good, didn't we, ol' hoss?" and he hit Beeliner a back handed slap and made Beeliner's bony chest rattle. Beeliner took it going away so it didn't hurt much. He was used to such demonstrations from Playful. He could skip farther and quicker than a whiskey Jack.

"If th' boss pays us back," he said.

"Oh, hell, he'll pay us back!" said Playful. "He wouldn't be that onery—after we got his own brother outa th' hoosegow."

They showed the release to the sheriff and he accepted it readily.

"Damned glad to git shut of him!" he said. "Fer a man his size, and no teeth, he can eat more than any hombre I ever picked up, and I've handled some and several. Take him and welcome, boys."

They conducted Brother Bill over to the wagon where Playful picked him up and set him on the head of a salt barrel just behind the wagon seat. Then he climbed up beside Beeliner and they started.

Outside town Playful pulled out his bottle of Red Eye and worried the cork out with his teeth. Politely he handed it back to Brother Bill.

"Have a snifter, ol' hoss," he said.

"Don't keer if I do," said Brother Bill and put the whole neck of the bottle in his toothless mouth. The liquor in the bottle dropped swiftly. Quickly Playful retrieved the bottle.

"Nobody But A Hog Gets Drunk!"

"That ain't perlite!" said Brother Bill.

"This here Red Eye is some powerful," said Playful. "You don't want to take on more than you can carry."

"I never do that!" said Brother Bill. "Nobody but a hog gits drunk."

After that Playful passed the bottle back every time he and Beeliner had a nip. It was soon emptied; then Beeliner got his out. Still Brother Bill matched them drink for drink without even so much as wiping his keen blue eyes—eyes exactly like their boss's.

To be exact he outdrank them. Playful never realized how far gone he was until he kicked at the brake lever and missed it so far he fell out of the wagon. It was quite a tussle to get back. Then he noticed that Beeliner's eyes were not tracking at

all. One of them looked to the left, the other to the right—sure sign that Beeliner was getting too much.

"Beeliner," he hissed, "we got t' watch out er this here hombre'll have us both hangin' on th' waggin tongue!"

"I s-swear he w-will!" hiccoughed Beeliner.

"What's the matter, boys?" cackled Brother Bill. "Likker all gone? Gimme 'nother pull at that bottle, will ye? I believe 'nother good drink er two an' I can begin t' feel her work a little."

Playful gave him the bottle. He finished it without even coming up for air and smacked his toothless mouth as he pitched the bottle away.

"Shore hope Shanty keeps plenty likker 'bout th' ranch," he said. "Nothin' like good likker t' keep a man young and spry."

The boys exchanged glances. It was simply past their belief. Here this toothless old scoundrel had drunk more of that powerful Red Eye than both of them.

"And we're used to it!" hissed Playful.

"What say?" called Brother Bill.

They were pulling into the ranch then and Playful did not take the trouble to answer. Shanty Funcannon, their militant employer, came out and stared at the man on the salt barrel as if he were a ghost.

Down jumped Brother Bill, seized Shanty's hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Brother!" he exclaimed, "I shore am glad t' see you after all these years. Forty year, ain't it? But I'd knowed you anywhere!"

"Bill!" exclaimed Shanty, finding his voice at last, "damn your onery old hide —where did you come from anyhow?"

"From ever whur," said Bill. "And now I got here I aims t' stay. This here roamin' around gits a man, Shanty. I ain't half th' man I used t' be. Why, comin' out here I took a little snifter 'er two outa th' boys' bottle and damn if it didn't make me a little dizzy. Gittin' old, Shanty, same as you. You're grizzled as roan steer!"

"Come up t' th' house," said Shanty. But there was little warmth in his voice. Playful drew him aside.

"Boss," he said, "we paid out seventeen dollars an' forty cents f' Brother Bill. They had him in th' cooler over't town and wouldn't let him out 'less we paid. Ever damn cent me'n Beeliner had, boss."

Shanty looked at him with a fishy eye.

"Who told you to pay it out?" he demanded. "Why didn't you let the old scoundrel stay in jail? He ain't worth th' powder and lead—"

Brother Bill came onto the scene then and Shanty snapped his false teeth together with a double click.

"Mighty nice set of teeth you got, Shanty," he said. "I reckon I'll have to gum 'er the rest of my days. Teeth costs t' beat hell."

"Come up to th' house," said Shanty, and led him off.

"Beeliner," said Playful direly, "it looks like we're hooked!"

"It shore do!" said Beeliner.

They were playing blind man's Seven Up in the bunk house several hours later when they heard the door latch rattle. It was Brother Bill. He had a good supper inside him and seemed lively as a cricket. To them he seemed to have filled out ten pounds with one meal. The more they looked at him the more he resembled Shanty.

"Ever play poker?" Playful asked him.

"Poker?" said Brother Bill. "That's a gamblin' game, ain't it?"

"Some," acknowledged Playful. "We'll show you how."

"I ain't got nothin' to gamble," said Brother Bill.

"We ain't either," said Playful. "But we'll play short. If we lose we'll pay you when Shanty pays us."

Brother Bill picked up the cards and

shuffled them by shuffling the edges together.

"All right, boys," he said briskly. "I'll oblige you, seein' you want to learn me th' game. How many cards do we use?"

"Five," said Playful, grinning at Beeliner. "And you ain't supposed to hold more'n four of a kind at one time."

They settled down for some fun. They didn't expect to win anything since Brother Bill had nothing to gamble, but they did expect to get him pretty deep in the hole.

But it didn't pan out. For at the end of an hour's play they owed him three months' pay each and doubtless would have owed a year had not Playful broke up the game by tearing the cards up.

"How did I do, boys?" asked Brother Bill. "Purty good fer a beginner? Let me know when you git ready to give me 'nother lesson."

After he had gone back to the house they looked at each other glumly.

"Beeliner," said Playful, "we gotta watch out er we'll be workin' for Brother Bill 'stead of Shanty. Looks t' me like he's played poker before!"

"I swear it does!" said Beeliner.

CHAPTER II

A Set of Whiskers

The next morning Shanty came down to the bunk house early.

"Git ready and go to work on that drift fence," he told them. "Goin' to take some time to fix that fence. Snow broke it all to hell last winter."

"We know it did, boss!" said Playful gloomily, for if there is anything your cowpuncher hates it is fence work.

"Might as well pack some grub up to that line cabin," said Shanty. "Take too much time ridin' back and forth to come in every night. And fix that fence right if it takes a month. If it ain't fixed th' cattle will drift right into that poison weed range and we'll have some losses. I wish I could sell that piece of land to somebody."

"So do we, boss, so do we!" said Beeliner.

"Git goin'," snapped Shanty.

They made ready for an extended stay at the line cabin. On the ride over they discussed Brother Bill with abandon and fervency.

"One thing dead shore, Beeliner," said Playful, "we don't want to git into more *short* poker games with that chickydee."

"I don't figger we got any business with him in any poker game, short er long," said Beeliner.

"He's onery!" declared Playful. "He's onery as hell, Beeliner. Makin' out he didn't know th' game and takin' our hard earned money that way!"

"We ain't earned it yet," said Beeliner. "But he drunk our likker. Hadn't been for him we'd had anyhow one bottle to take with us."

"Yeah. And we paid him outa th' cooler. Beeliner, I swear I never will pay any hombre outa jail agin. I jist hope he ain't run off before we git back t' th' ranch."

"Be jist like him to play such an onery trick on us," declared Beeliner. "Playful, he took our hides off in that poker game worse'n Full House ever done it. I reckon we didn't play crooked enuff."

"We *couldn't* play crooked enuff t' beat that chickydee!" declared Playful. "We got to rig some other way t' git our money back, Beeliner."

"Well," said Beeliner, "th' boss will have t' put up with his oneriness while we're gone."

"Yeah," said Playful brightening. "He will fer a fact. And serve him right, damn his hide. He's th' one that ort to have paid that grub bill. But we'll git 'em both, Beeliner. We'll git 'em."

Playful was naturally an optimistic fellow. He didn't waste a lot of time mourn-

ing over hard breaks, he just trusted to things coming their way eventually, which they did, assisted somewhat, at times, by Playful's effective fists.

They had been on the fence line a week without seeing a soul, when one day as they came in to dinner, they found a man at the camp, awaiting them.

He was a big fellow wearing high laced boots and other clothing that city men usually affected on the range. But somehow he did not talk or act like a tenderfoot.

"Hello, boys," he said. "Your outfit own this land?"

"Yeah," said Playful, piling off his horse and looking the man over.

"My name's Leckner. I've been looking for just such a piece of land as this. Figuring on starting a horse ranch. Saddle stuff and maybe some stake horses. Do you reckon your boss would sell it?"

"Yeah," said Playful, and started to launch into a lurid description of the land when Beeliner kicked him.

"This here land, podner," said Beeliner, "is a damn fine piece of land. But if you put th' price high enuff, Ol' Shanty'll sell. He'll sell anything if th' price is right."

"Where will I find him?" asked Leckner.

"Down at th' ranch. Jist foller this drift fence down till you come to a gate, then foller th' trail. Tell Shanty it'll take us another two weeks on this fence."

Leckner thanked them, got on his horse and rode down the fence.

"Shore hope he buys it," said Playful. "Then we'd be shut of buildin' a new fence here ever' spring."

"We would fer a fact," said Beeliner.

A week later and they were still working. One noon Playful eyed his stack of flapjacks suspiciously.

"Damn you, Beeliner, you hooked me! They ain't but 'levum here!"

"I didn't hook ye!" declared Beeliner. "That's all th' flour we got."

Playful grinned. "Then we can—"

"There comes th' boss!" Beeliner wagged his head towards the fence.

"Shore is! Ack wore out, Beeliner. Mebby he'll let us offa this damned job."

But Beeliner was staring at the approaching rider.

"Playful, that's Brother Bill!" he exclaimed.

Playful looked again.

"Well, damn if it 'tain't!" he agreed. "He's wearin' some of th' boss's clothes and he's fat as a porkypine. Did you ever see a hombre fatten up so quick, Beeliner?"

Beeliner shook his head.

Brother Bill pulled up his horse before them. He had filled out amazingly. His short beard had grown, too, and wearing Shanty's clothes, he looked amazingly like him.

Playful grinned widely.

"We thought it was th' boss," he said. "If you had some teeth we couldn't tell you apart, could we, Beeliner?"

"I swear we couldn't!" said Beeliner.

"Been tryin' to get him to let me wear one of his sets," said Brother Bill. "He ain't got no use f' two. Jist wants t' be onery. He's onery as hell, boys, but Ma's a fine cook. How about 'nother little poker game?"

"You ride all th' way out here fer that?" asked Playful dourly.

"Nope. Shanty sent me up here t' tell you boys t' come on in."

"Then we'd better fog," said Playful. "He'll raise hell if we don't."

It was dark when they reached the ranch. Bill went on to the ranch house and the boys went into the bunkhouse. They hardly had a light made before Shanty came hustling in. There was a worried look on his face.

"Boys," he said, "I always treated you purty good, ain't I?"

"Fairish," said Playful. "What do you want us to do now that's agin th' law?"

"Not a damn thing!" said Shanty. He looked around stealthily and lowered his voice.

"Tell you, boys," he said, "I want you to ketch that damned brother of mine and shave his bristles off! He's got so he looks so damn much like me even Ma can't hardly tell us apart. 'Specially when he swipes my teeth."

"Does he swipe your teeth, boss?" asked Playful gently.

Shanty leaped to his feet and pranced up and down the bunkhouse. He stomped and he raved and he cussed.

"He swipes ever' thing I got!" he raged. "He's the oneriest, pilferenest, *cussedest* cuss that ever was whelped. Why I don't hardly dare go to bed any more—" Shanty suddenly pulled up and put a brake on his violence. "He might go over to town and draw all my money outa th' bank!" he said weightily.

"Shorely he wouldn't be that onery!" said Playful.

"He is!" vowed Shanty. "Ma won't let me run him off. Says he ain't got no home ner money—"

"How much will you give us to shave him, boss?" asked Beeliner, scenting a bargain.

"I'll give you five dollars, if you'll do a slick job," said Shanty.

"Apiece?" said Beeliner quickly.

Beeliner always put that in. Shanty glared at him. But he needed the boys too badly to quarrel with them.

"Yes—apiece!" he snorted. "But you got to git it done right off. You git the whiskers off and git 'em off quick. I don't like to speak ill of my brother, but that feller is plumb *onery*. Either them whiskers comes off, or he gits off the ranch!"

"We'll take 'em off, boss; we'll take 'em off!" said Playful soothingly.

"We shore will!" echoed Beeliner.

"I'll send him right on down here tonight!" said Shanty making for the door. Then he turned. "Was there a feller up there lookin' over that land?"

"Yeah," said Playful. "We sent him down. We told him it was a hell of a good piece of land. Did you see him, boss?"

"I seen him!" Shanty's brow knotted. "He offered me a thousand dollars for that land. Somethin' fishy about it. That land ain't worth ten cents and he ain't no tenderfoot. He could see there wasn't any water on it, after th' snow leaves."

"I'd take th' thousand, boss, and let him do the worryin'," said Playful.

"I'll have to look into him first," said Shanty. "But you boys git ready fer Bill."

"We'll be ready for him," said Playful, grinning. "Send him right on down. And don't pay no 'tention if you hear some war whoops let out. That there ol' bristle blade of Beeliner's pulls t' beat hell!"

Shanty showed his teeth, then broke for the house at a high trot. Before long they heard someone coming.

"Git out th' old bristle blade, Beeliner, and stop up th' cracks. Ma might come down on us if we leave—"

The door opened then and Playful broke off abruptly, for it was Ma who stood there, her ample form almost filling the doorway. She stopped just a minute, then she came in and closed the door.

"Boys, did Shanty come down here and want you to shave his brother?" she asked.

Playful grinned. "We cannot tell you no lie, Ma," he said. "He shore did."

Ma laughed. There was a wholesomeness about her that endeared her to them.

" . . . The Oneriest, Pilferenest, Cussedest Cuss That Ever Was Whelped!"

"Listen, boys, I ain't got time to stand and talk. I never asked you boys for much, have I?"

"You shore ain't," said Playful.

"Will you do me a favor?"

"If we can we will," said Playful. "What did you want us to do, Ma?"

"For twenty years I've been tryin' to get Shanty to shave. I want you to shave him instead of his brother."

They exchanged worried glances. Beeliner's Adam's apple began to race.

"You want us to shave *Shanty!*" he exclaimed.

"But hell fir—but my goodness, Ma!" exclaimed Playful, "old Shanty'd jist naturally salivate us—"

"Two great big boys like you afraid of one little old man like Shanty?" she scoffed.

"We can handle him, easy," said Playful. "It ain't that. It's what he'll do when we turn him loose, Ma. He'd go right fer his bootjack, er his six shooter. Aw hell, Ma, you wouldn't want t' see us shot plumb full of holes, would you?"

"Here's how we'll work it," she said. "Since his brother has taken on so much flesh and let his whiskers grow it's hard to tell him from Shanty. If Shanty didn't have false teeth I could hardly tell them apart myself. You're supposed to shave his brother. In the morning I'll send Shanty down here—without his false teeth. You think he's Bill and you shave him. Is that clear?"

Playful grinned admiringly.

"It shore is," he said. "But how will you git him separated from his teeth, Ma?"

"He always takes them out at night," she said, smiling. "And Bill is always taking them. He'll probably take them again in the morning."

Playful laid back his head and guffawed. Even Beeliner's mournful countenance lightened.

"You'll stand between us and Shanty if he does go on th' rampage, won't you?" he asked.

"I won't let him touch you," she promised.

"He might fire us," said Playful.

Ma laughed at that.

"He's fired you a thousand times, hasn't he? Boys, he talks awful to you at times, but he couldn't get along without you and nobody knows it any better than he does. If the cattle do good this year he's promised to take me back east. I want him to look half human. That's why I want him shaved. I know if he gets that awful old beard off once he'll never let it grow again."

"He promised us five dollars t' shave Brother Bill," Playful reminded her.

"Apiece," said Beeliner quickly.

"I'll do better than that," she said. "I'll give you ten—apiece! Can I count on you?"

"Yeah!" said Playful recklessly. "We'll take ol' Shanty's bristles off fer her, won't we, ol' hoss?" and he hit Beeliner such a whack on the back that Beeliner's neck jerked in a full half foot. Ma laughed and went out.

Playful turned to Beeliner.

"Git out that old bristle blade, Beeliner," he directed. "Whet her up good. We got to git some practice before we start on th' boss."

Beeliner got out his old razor and stropped it on a belly band hanging on the wall.

"Make some foam," said Playful.

Beeliner attended to that. But his eyes began to look worried.

"Now," said Playful, picking up the razor, "do you want to set down er lay down?"

Beeliner swallowed like a cow with a turnip stuck in her throat.

"Playful," he pleaded, "let's jist wait till we git th' boss t' practice on!"

"Oh, hell no!" said Playful. "That wouldn't do a-tall. We might cut his

throat. We got to have some practice. Set down there on that bench and stretch that hoss neck of your'n over th' winder sill. I'll take long swipes."

Beeliner still protested, but to no avail. Playful forced him to sit down on the bench and lean his head back. Then he lathered him profusely. Took the razor in his mighty right hand, set his left across Beeliner's forehead and grinned.

"Now ol' hoss," he said, "remember this here ceilin' is damned low!"

With that he set the edge of the razor at the bottom of Beeliner's neck and brought it up slowly, powerfully. Beeliner's lank belly began to arch upward, higher and higher until he was supported on his heels at one end, the back of his head at the other. The one eye that wasn't covered with Playful's hand rolled wildly.

"Arrrrrr-OOOF!" he exploded at last. "My God, Playful, keep one foot on th' floor, anyhow!"

Playful grinned.

"Mebby I should put a little more speed on her," he said. "How's this?"

He gave the razor a flip. It sheared through Beeliner's bristle with a sound not unlike that of a circle saw meeting iron in a log. Beeliner gave a galvanic spring and the wild yell he unleashed could not have been keener had he been cut square in two.

He struck on the small of his back, bounced once, came to his feet, running. Playful made a dive for him, caught his closest ankle and hauled him back into the bunkhouse.

"Beeliner, I'm ashamed of you! You beller worse than a steer in th' brandin' chute!"

"That hurts worse than a brandin' iron!" howled Beeliner. "You're pullin' ever' whisker I got out by th' roots! By God, I won't stand it—"

"We got t' have some practice, ain't we? You know damn well we have—"

"Somebody comin'!" hissed Beeliner.

It was Shanty again. He came in quickly and shut the door. Glanced at Playful, then at Beeliner.

"We was jist practicin', boss," explained Playful.

"Well don't make so damned much noise about it!" snarled Shanty. "Sounded like somebody was tore square in two! Bill's liable to get suspicious. I kinda figger he is now, 'cause he was gone to bed when I got back to the house and I couldn't git him up. I'll send him down first thing in the mornin'. Don't you let him git out of here till his whiskers is layin' on th' floor."

Playful made a great swipe with the razor.

"We'll lay 'em on th' floor, boss," he said placatingly. "Won't we, ol' hoss?"

"Yeah!" said Beeliner.

Just as Shanty opened the door to return to the house a horseman coming in at a gallop pulled up his horse sharply when he saw Shanty standing there.

The light from the bunkhouse fell full upon him and the boys saw that it was Tom French, a local rancher with whom Shanty had had trouble over the range.

"Funcannon," he said harshly, "I hear you're about to sell that piece of range up under th' drift fence. Anything to it?"

Shanty, always easy to fire, fired instantly at French's manner and tone. He faced French all abristle. Playful nudged Beeliner and grinned delightedly.

"French," snapped Shanty, "I reckon I'll do what I damn please with that land, seein' it's mine. And it'll be a damn cold day in July before I ask your permission to do *anything!* Is that clear?"

Tom French sat and stared at Shanty a moment before he replied. Then he gathered up his reins.

"Don't you sell that land!" he grated. "Not to Leckner!" He rammed his spurs home and went tearing off. Shanty looked after him a moment, then went on towards the house.

"Hell!" said Playful disappointedly, "I thought mebby he was goin' to git off."

"Mebby he's gone fer help," said Beeliner.

Playful's face brightened quickly.

"Mebby he has!" he said hopefully.

CHAPTER III
The Shaving of Shanty

But Tommy French did not return that night. The boys waited for him a long time, Playful, at least, hoping that he would return with reinforcements. Beeliner was thankful for one thing: Playful went to sleep waiting for French to return and Beeliner escaped the ordeal of further practicing for the bristle shearing party.

They had just gotten up next morning when Beeliner, who had put his eye to the knot hole, spun with unusual alacrity.

"Boss's comin'—hellity-brindle, Playful!"

"See if he's got any teeth," instructed Playful.

Beeliner looked again.

"Nose is a hittin' his chin," he said.

Playful grinned.

"You must be losing your eyesight, Beeliner. That's Brother Bill."

"Brother Bill—hell!" exclaimed Beeliner. "You think I can't tell th' boss when he's got that kinda look in his eye? It's th' boss and he's mad as hell about somepin."

"It's Brother Bill!" stated Playful firmly. "Git that bristle blade ready. We got to work fast, Beeliner."

Shanty hit the door with such force that it flew inward and Shanty shot half way across the floor. His militant blue eyes were shooting sparks of rage and his hair was all on end. He swept the room with his eyes as if he expected to find somebody else there.

"Where's Bill?" he demanded toothlessly. "Damn his onery picture! He's got my teeth agin—"

Down dropped Playful's mighty right hand. It closed on Shanty's neck and Shanty's eyes popped. His tongue shot out like a toad's striking for a fly.

"My God, Beeliner!" said Playful, "ain't Brother Bill got one hell of a tongue!"

"Longer'n a steer's!" Beeliner wagged his head and stood waiting with the razor.

Shanty's face assumed a scarlet complexion. He threshed and kicked wildly. Playful socked him down upon a bench.

"Set down, Brother Bill," he said soothingly. "Boss ordered us to take them bristles off. Git goin', Beeliner. What in hell do you reckon we was practicin' fer?"

"*You* was th' one that done th' practicin'," Beeliner reminded him. "Here, you handle th' razor."

"Git busy!" roared Playful. "You know damn well you couldn't hold him. Wade in on him!"

Beeliner waded in. One of Shanty's flailing feet caught him under the chin and turned him a back somersault. Beeliner hung on to the razor but his eyes looked worried.

"I—we ain't got no lather, Playful!"

"Damn th' lather!" roared Playful. "Take 'em off dry! I can't hold him all day. Wade in on him."

Beeliner came in again, cautiously. Again Shanty lashed out with his boots. Only by a galvanic skip did Beeliner escape mortal injury.

"Playful," he said, "you're goin' to git me bad crippled yit!"

Playful laid a timber like leg over Shanty's legs and held him motionless for a second. He grinned at Beeliner.

"Ol' Brother Bill's shore got a mean eye, ain't he?"

"I swear he has!" said Beeliner.

"If he had some teeth I'd think we made a mistake and got th' boss," continued Playful, grinning into Shanty's purple face. "Git goin', Beeliner!"

Beeliner sidled up to Shanty, laid the

razor athwart his right temple and made a down swoop. Shanty writhed and twisted like a person in mortal anguish. Playful was big and strong, but Shanty tossed him this way and that. But Playful held him. Playful could hold a steer. He glanced approvingly at the great swath Beeliner had mowed in Shanty's forest of beard.

"You're doin' noble, Beeliner," he said encouragingly. "Give him a swipe on th' other side t' kinda balance him up with."

Beeliner obliged, only he swept the razor upward this time—against the grain. Shanty succeeded in getting his neck free for an instant and the scream he let out simply tore the air apart. Playful shut off the scream midway, but Shanty got a foot free and buried his boot to the strap in Beeliner's middle. Beeliner's chin struck his knees as he folded. He gasped horribly.

Playful addressed Shanty severely.

"Brother Bill," he quoth, "if you don't tame down I'll have to bat you one. Hurry up, Beeliner! He's gittin' stouter all th' time!"

Beeliner had both sides shorn then. But when he attempted the passage around Shanty's chin he struck some tough going.

"Playful," he panted, "she jist bounces back ever time I hit this patch here!"

"Take a running start!" advised Playful. "Take a hell of a big run, Beeliner."

Beeliner backed off and took a running start. He took a big run and he won through. Then with Playful urging him to speed he finished the chin.

"Should I dress down his upper lip?" he asked.

Playful took one look at the havoc Beeliner had already wrought and his eyes bulged.

"My God, Beeliner, he looks like a haunt! Jist take the shears and roach him up a little and we'll turn him loose."

Beeliner took the big shears they used to trim manes and fetlocks with and trimmed Shanty's mustache into a short crop.

"Now then," said Playful weightily, "git that door open, Beeliner, and stay outa my way!"

Beeliner opened the door. Playful let Shanty loose and made a great spring for it. Unfortunately he arrived there just as Beeliner tried to go through and they met. Beeliner, being much the lighter, was hurled against the door jamb and Playful shot on out into the lot. As Beeliner rebounded Shanty caught him a crack with a table leg. The leg snapped like a straw and Beeliner came to his knees.

"We'd Better Reach For Some Distance. He's Gone Fer His Gun!"

Shanty grabbed for another table leg and made for him again. Beeliner didn't take time to get up—he completely outran Shanty, on his knees. When Shanty leaped through the door he found the space entirely divested of cowboys.

Playful leaped a ten-pole corral fence, crossed it and leaped the other side just as Beeliner came galloping around the long way. Beeliner would have run Playful down had not Playful restrained him forcibly. They crouched there behind the fence and panted awhile. Playful looked at the back of Beeliner's head critically.

"My God, Beeliner!" he puffed. "He leveled that knot you had back there plumb down! Your hat never will fit now!"

Beeliner could only wheeze. He wagged his head forebodingly.

"Playful!" he wheezed, "we'd better reach for some distance. He's gone fer his gun!"

"Ma'll tame him down," said Playful soothingly. Then he threw back his head and unleashed a tremendous guffaw.

"You shore as hell can navigate on your knees, Beeliner! I bet if a man got you plumb down you could outrun a horse—"

Around the corral dashed Shanty. In his right hand he gripped his big forty-four. He threw down on them and a solid sheet of red fire leaped from the muzzle. Shanty shot that big gun so fast the reports were a continuous roll.

Playful didn't wait to leap the fence this time. He just tucked his head and crashed straight through those stout pine poles as if they were matchwood; went galloping across the corral and rammed the other side, and straight through it.

He heard some one coming right at his heels and turned on additional speed. But when he dived through the door of the ranch house his pursuer was close behind him. He plunged through the door and whirled in time to see Beeliner dive through like a prairie dog diving into its hole.

Ma came running into the room.

"Tame him down—tame him down!" gasped Playful. "You're goin' to lose a couple good hands if he keeps on shootin'."

"There's no bullets in his shells," said Ma. "Go on out the back way. I'll stop him when he comes through."

Out the back way they galloped. Then when they heard Shanty rush into the house they circled and won their way back to the bunk house.

There sat Brother Bill grinning at them with Shanty's best set of teeth.

"Ready for that poker game, boys?" he said.

"Look out th' knot hole, Beeliner!" puffed Playful. "I know Ma means well, but th' boss is shore hell to stop with jist good intentions!"

Beeliner put his eyes to the knot hole and looked as he wheezed.

"Ain't come out yet!"

"Keep on a-looking! He'll come damn sudden when he does come. We took this job too damn cheap, Beeliner!"

"I swear we did! I—there comes that hombre that wanted to buy that land, Playful! We better stop him. If he goes to th' house now he'll buy somethin' a damn sight hotter'n land—"

Playful turned on Bill Funcannon.

"You step to the door and holler at him," he said. "We don't want Shanty to know where we are yet awhile."

"Shore!" said Bill and hopped up.

He pulled the door open just as Leckner was about to ride past on his way to the house. Leckner saw him and pulled up his horse.

"Ah, there you are, Mr. Funcannon," he said. "I come over to close that land deal."

"Tell'm to come in here!" hissed Playful.

"Come right in, Mr. Leckner," said Bill cordially. "We can deal right here."

Leckner came in. He glanced briefly at Playful and Beeliner. Then he turned to Bill Funcannon. Whipped a paper from his pocket and laid it on the table. Then he shoved a pen at Bill.

"Sign right there," he said, "and I'll hand you a thousand dollars."

"Shore!" said Bill Funcannon. He picked up the pen and signed the paper.

"To make this shipshape I'll ask you boys to put your names down as witnesses," said Leckner.

Beeliner could manage to sign his name, although nobody could read it afterward. He took the pen and after much labor made some weird marks on the paper. Playful couldn't make even a letter.

"Put mine down too, Beeliner," he said. "My writin' finger is all bunged up."

Beeliner made some more marks.

"You touch the pen," Leckner told Playful.

"Do which?" said Playful.

"When anybody signs your name for you

you have to touch the pen to make it legal," explained Leckner.

"We shore want it legal!" said Playful, and poked the pen with a forefinger as large as a scared cat's tail.

Leckner counted out a thousand dollars in new bills and put them on the table. Then he put the paper into his pocket and stepped towards the door.

"When you need any more land, podner," said Playful, "come around."

"I'll do that!" said Leckner and stepped out, closing the door behind him.

Bill Funcannon reached for the money. Playful batted him halfway across the room.

"Leave her lay!" he hissed.

"Now looky here," said Bill militantly, "that's my brother's money. You ain't—"

Playful fixed him with a hard eye.

"Says which?" he said softly.

Brother Bill forced a grin with Shanty's teeth and backed away. Outside there was a sudden rush of galloping horses. Bill opened the door just as a band of riders, Tom French in the lead, swept up. French saw Bill standing in the bunk house door and checked his horse. He made a motion with his hand and the other men deployed so that nobody could get away from the bunkhouse. French's face was thunderous as he leaped off his horse and strode straight towards the door. He leveled a rigid forefinger at Bill Funcannon.

"Funcannon!" he barked, "you sold that piece of land to Leckner, didn't you? Not a damn bit of use for you to try to deny it because we made Leckner show us the paper, as we rode in. You sold it and I warned you not to sell—"

Playful thrust Bill Funcannon aside.

"Podner," he said softly, "I reckon the boss's got a right to sell anything—"

"Not by a damnsight!" shouted French. "He ain't got no right to sell cow range to a lousy sheepman. Funcannon, you know damn well that Leckner outfit has been tryin' to crowd in on this range! You knowed damn well if they got that land they could throw sheep on my range and ruin me. We ain't goin' to stand for it!"

"What do you aim t' do about it?" Playful asked.

French faced him.

"We aim t' take th' old hellion out and pour a barrel of tar on him. Then we aim to roll him in feathers. Then we aim to take him to town and drag him up and down main street till he or the rope is wore out—or both. And if you move a finger to stop us, we'll crack down on you!"

Playful grinned widely and moved away from the door.

"Podner," he said cheerfully, "me'n Beeliner ain't aimin' to stop you. Any man'd do that ort t' be burnt alive. Take th' old chickydee and welcome."

French stared at him suspiciously. He knew Playful's reputation as a fighter and he knew both the boys were loyal to Shanty Funcannon.

Bill Funcannon suddenly spoke.

"But I ain't Shanty, gentlemen. I'm his brother, Bill."

French laughed harshly.

"You ain't Shanty!" he said mockingly. "Hear that, boys? The damned old hound is tryin' to pull that one over on us. He says he ain't Shanty!"

One of French's men spoke unexpectedly.

"Shanty has got a brother visitin' him, Tom. We'd better look through the house before we do anything."

CHAPTER IV

A Big Deal

TOM FRENCH hesitated.

"Fellers," he said, "I've knowed Shanty Funcannon some and several years. And if that ain't him standin' right there my eyesight has gone bad. But if you say so, we'll look through the house."

"We better be shore!" said the man.

"Hefty," French addressed one of his

riders, "you stay right here and ride herd on this hombre that claims to be *Brother Bill!*"

Hefty was riding a sixteen hundred pound stud horse. He needed a big horse to pack him for he was almost as big as Playful. He planted himself before the door and leered at Playful through a gap in his front teeth through which a badger could have crawled.

Playful didn't even look at him. He was watching the other men. Beeliner stretched his long neck over Playful's shoulder and counted them with a jabbing forefinger.

"—nine, ten, 'levum, twelve and this here rannie makes thir'teen, Playful," he hissed. "An onlucky number."

"There won't be thir'teen very long if them rannies tries to bust into that house!" said Playful darkly.

Tom French rode right up to the door and rapped on it with his six shooter butt. Ma opened it and stood there barring the way.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"We want Shanty Funcannon!" bawled French, jumping off his horse. "And we want him quick!"

"You get away from here—quick!" Ma replied.

"Is he in there?" demanded French.

"Yes, he's here!" Ma replied defiantly. "But he's not able to—"

French rushed at her. Quickly Ma put her hand back and produced a four foot stove poke. She banged French square on the head with it and French sat right down on his haunches and grunted. He waved his head to and fro a little while, then he bounced up and backed off a little.

"Rush her, boys!" he yelled.

Playful moved with such astounding rapidity that he caught Hefty unaware. Playful's fist took Hefty just under his nose and glanced upward. It drove Hefty's nose right up between his eyes and Hefty pitched backward with a snorty yelp. Playful leaped over him, but Beeliner, following, stepped squarely into Hefty's open mouth and Hefty tried to bite his boot heel off.

When Playful reached the house French and another man had seized Ma and had disarmed her. They were holding her while the rest got ready to rush the house.

Playful caught the man on Ma's right by the belly band and threw him clear over the house.

"Git him!" shouted French. "Gang him —kill him—"

That was as far as he got, for Playful's hammer-like fist drove the rest of the words down French's throat along with a lot of teeth. French dived backward. Then the others were on Playful with a rush.

"Beeliner!" shrieked Ma. "Get in there and help Playful. They'll kill—"

Beeliner drew her out of the way.

"No, sir!" he yelled. "Playful would be mad as hell if I sp'iled his fun. They ain't but nine of 'em!"

Playful met the nine with a broad grin splitting his face, the reckless light of battle flaming in his eyes. He knocked down three men by the simple expedient of hitting the foremost so hard that he took two men with him when he dived backward.

"Whoopy-tiyiyo!" whooped Playful. "Powder Reeee—ver! She's a mile wide and an inch deep!"

He came into them with arms driving like pistons. Heads bumped, teeth clashed. Men spun this way and that. The last one on his feet suddenly turned tail and sought safety in desperate flight. Playful was just pinning his ears back to take after him when a snarling voice sounded from the door.

"What in the blisterin' blue hell is a comin' off in this place, anyhow?"

Dead, Playful would have known that voice. The boss's. He spun on his heel. There in the doorway stood the most weird sight he had ever laid eyes upon.

Shanty it was, without a stitch of clothing on but with a sort of breech-clout wrapped didy fashion about his middle. He held his big forty-four gripped in his right fist and even though he was not an impressive figure as he stood there, there was that light in his eyes that commanded attention.

"What's comin' off?" roared Shanty again.

"Boss," said Playful, "these here rannies was a-goin' to take ya out and tar and feather ya!"

Tom French got to his feet just then. He spat out a small bucketful of blood and teeth and made some gurgling sounds.

Getting Rid Of Brother Bill

"Hey, Tom!" yelled the man that had ran away from Playful. "That rannie at th' bunkhouse is tryin' to git away. It's Shanty, shore as hell!"

French took one quick look at Shanty as he stood there, all but naked, toothless, beardless, and French whirled. Shouted a command that sounded like nothing more than it did the dying rattle of a throat-cut steer, then made for the horses.

Bill Funcannon had evidently decided that things were getting too warm for him. He made a dive for one of the horses, went up like a monkey and away he tore. French won his horse first and after him he rode, then after French came the others, strung out for half a mile or more. Hefty was the last, and he went afoot, because it was his horse that Bill had purloined.

Playful grinned widely.

"Bet he outruns the whole bunch!" he said.

"Jist so he keeps headed th' other way!" said Shanty fervently.

"He will," said Beeliner. "With that gang crowdin' him he won't have no chanct to circle. Them hombres is plumb earnest, boss!"

"Shanty!" said Ma, "get back into the house and get some clothes on! You look plumb indecent!"

"Clothes!" howled Shanty. "How'n hell can I put any clothes on when I can't find even a sock! *You* hid them clothes and you know damn—"

Ma laughed. "I reckon it'll be safe to give them to you now," she said. "But for goodness' sake get into the house. I'll find them."

She went into the house then, and Shanty, before he turned to follow her, turned to glare at the boys. They began to edge away. Shanty stabbed a finger at them.

"When I git some clothes on," he said direfully, "you two misbegotten sons of coyotes come into th' house. We got a settlement a-comin'!"

He bounced into the house then and they exchanged glances.

"You reckon we'd better grab us a handful of saddle leather and take out after French, Playful?" Beeliner asked weightily.

"And not even git our pay?" said Playful.

Beeliner reached down into his pocket and pulled out a great roll of bills.

"Sheepman's money!" he hissed.

Ma appeared. Beeliner snapped the money out of sight.

"Come on in, boys," she said. "Might as well get it over with now."

"Me'n Beeliner figger mebby we better take us a long vacation," said Playful. "Jist tell Shanty we'll donate what he owes us."

"Yeah," said Beeliner. "We'll be good to him oncet."

"You come right on in here!" said Ma severely. "I'll protect you. Besides, Shanty ain't near so mad as he lets on. He kinda likes that shave. I seen him looking at himself twice. Come on in and just act innocent."

So in they filed. Shanty had some clothes on now and his second best set of teeth in his mouth. He stared at them until Playful shifted his weight from foot to foot and Beeliner stole a look behind to see that the get-away was clear.

"All right!" snapped Shanty. "Talk! I want to know what you two mean by gangin' me and cuttin' my whiskers off. But I warn you—it'd better be good!"

Playful always looked to Beeliner at such times. Playful did the fighting and let Beeliner do the explaining.

"Boss," said Beeliner, "we thought you was Brother Bill. You know you said you'd send him down to th' bunkhouse th' first thing this mornin'."

"What's that?" shouted Shanty, plainly taken aback.

"And you didn't have no teeth in—your chin was a hittin' your beak just like his'n," put in Playful.

"Why, you—you—" Shanty's speech failed him.

"Now, Shanty," said Ma, "you know you can't blame them. You know you look an awful sight alike. And besides if they hadn't shaved you, look what Tom French and his men would have done to you. They might have killed you, Shanty!"

"They would fer a fact!" said Beeliner solemnly.

"They had me all played out, boss," avowed Playful. "They fit to beat hell."

"What I can't understand," said Shanty, "is why Tom French and them others was so riled up. What in hell did they want to tar and feather me fer?"

"Why, boss," explained Beeliner, "Brother Bill sold that land to that lousy sheep herder!"

"And then made us put down our names to make it legal!" added Playful. "Brother Bill shore sold it, put down your name and Leckner paid him a thousand bucks—"

Shanty almost hit the ceiling.

"Where's my gun? Git me a horse! Why in hell don't you do somethin'—"

"Shanty," said Ma placatingly, "what's the matter with you? That sale was no good. You know it wasn't! Bill didn't have no right to sell that land. Leckner just thought he was being smart and now he's out a thousand dollars."

Shanty calmed down in a second. He grinned sheepishly.

"That's right, Ma, he didn't." He whirled on the boys and showed his teeth at them. "Git out of here—git out!" and he reached for a bootjack that wasn't there.

The boys got out. Down in the bunkhouse Playful grinned from ear to ear. Hit Beeliner a booming buffet.

"Ol' hoss," he chortled, "we shore come out of that good! We got th' boss's bristles off fer Ma, and we got us a wad of money and had a hell of a fine fight fer nothin'. We shore come out good!"

"We did fer a fact!" said Beeliner. "We even got shut of Brother Bill."

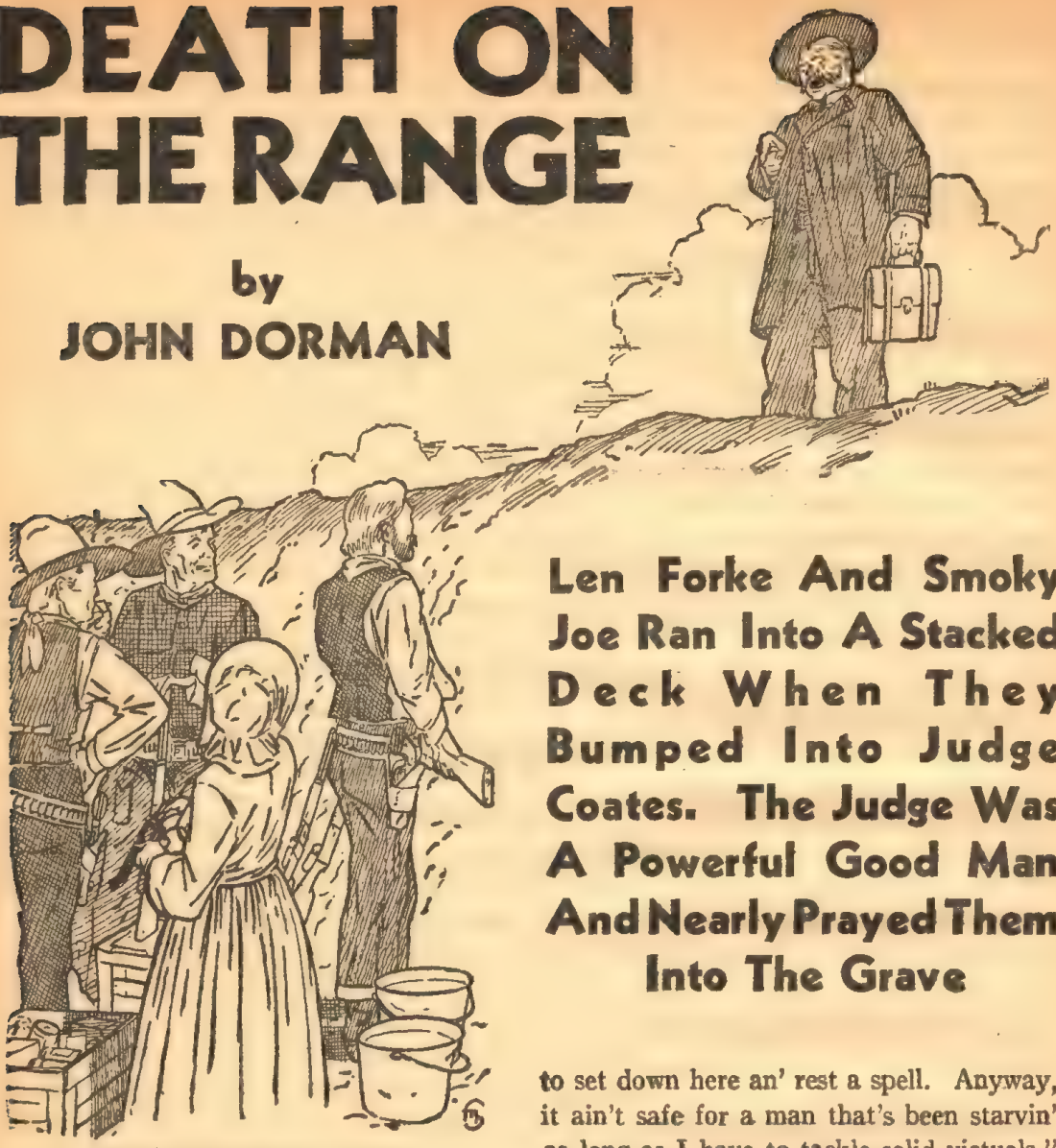
Playful grinned hugely.

"That," he stated, "was worth damn nigh as much as the fight!"

DEATH ON THE RANGE

by

JOHN DORMAN



"Stand right where you are."

Len Forke And Smoky Joe Ran Into A Stacked Deck When They Bumped Into Judge Coates. The Judge Was A Powerful Good Man And Nearly Prayed Them Into The Grave

Dust-covered and dog-tired, Len Forke and little Smoky Joe Burton aired their saddles in front of the one general store in Lobo Wells—a rambling barracks with the name Amos Trenton painted in faint letters across the false front.

Smoky looked sourly around him. The town had ten buildings in all, one store, one jail, one justice of the peace's office, two barns, five houses. No hotel, no restaurant, no pool room—and no saloon.

"Leonard," Smoky sighed, "it tires me out just to look at this town. I'm going to set down here an' rest a spell. Anyway, it ain't safe for a man that's been starvin' as long as I have to tackle solid victuals."

Len grinned, although he wasn't feeling much better than Smoky. They'd spent a straight 40 hours in the saddle, with no sleep and almost no grub, hazing two dozen homesick, fractious, stampeding stockers the last twenty miles of a fifty-mile trek—only to find that the henpecked rancher who'd bought the cows from the Pitchfork didn't dare invite them in to eat and sleep, because his wife was having one of her terrible sick headaches.

"C'mon," Len said, encouragingly. "The way our luck's been runnin', Mr. Trenton'll be out-a groceries, an' you won't have to eat."

They limped up to the screen door. Len pulled it open, looked over Smoky's hat into the store — and stopped short, blue eyes gleaming. His big hand fell heavily on Smoky's shoulder. "Easy!" he whispered.

A white-haired, husky old man was standing behind the counter of the firearms department, his eyes bulging right out on his cheek bones.

In front of the counter was a rawboned cowman in a faded blue shirt and tattered Levi's. He had the muzzle of a .30-30 carbine against his head, and was stretching his right arm to see if he could get his thumb on the trigger. He could.

Smoky's bacon-rind face paled to a whang-leather yellow.

"My God, Len," he whispered, "he's goin' to commit suicide!"

"Sure is measurin' himself for it," Len agreed, evenly.

The big cowman dropped the gun into the crook of his arm, and growled: "Gimme a dozen shells, an' charge the whole thing. My estate'll be good for it."

It was plain as print that old Trenton didn't want to sell him either rifle or ammunition. Len slid the .45 from the shoulder holster under his shirt, and nudged Smoky. They bore down on the cowman like a couple of skulking wolves; things were due to be lively if he heard them coming, and started swinging that rifle.

They covered the last two yards in flying leaps. Their hoglegs jammed viciously into the cowman's ribs, and Len yanked the rifle out of his hands.

"Sorry, stranger," Len smiled. "But we don't charge guns for suicide purposes."

A maniacal gleam came briefly into the cowman's hazel eyes. He gnawed at his lower lip like a man eating green corn. Then he broke away, raced for the door, leaped on a horse at the hitch rail, and galloped off. The three stared after him.

Presently Trenton squared his shoulders, and sighed. "You boys sure come just in time—I was hopin' somebody'd come in. Bill Andrus is a good hombre, ordinarily, but somebody's been poisonin' off his critters, or else they've got some ungodly disease amongst 'em. It's got him just about crazy."

"He looked it," Len agreed. "Was he gunnin' for just himself alone?"

Trenton shrugged. "Well, he ain't the kind of hombre that'd need 12 shots to blow his own brains out. An' him an' old Judge Coates, the justice of the peace across the street, have been yellin' at each other the last couple hours. Looks to me like he was fixin' to shoot Coates first, an' himself if necessary."

"What kind of gent is Coates?" Smoky wanted to know.

"He's a powerful good man," Trenton said, viciously. "Hates sin an' liquor an' gamblin'. Does his duty, by God, no matter who it hurts. He's been tryin' for years to pray me out of a drunkard's grave. He'll be comin' over in a few minutes to see why Bill left town so sudden. An' I reckon I'm goin' to pour me a snort uh corn liquor before he gets here. Bill got me all unsettled."

"Me too," Smoky said, brightly. Len grinned. Trenton chuckled.

"I was figurin' you boys in the invitation," he said.

He brought glasses and a quart fruit jar of corn from the back room, and poured husky drinks at the grocery counter. Len emptied his glass, and squared his shoulders. Then he put a couple dollars on the counter and said:

"That kind-a fills a long-felt need! An' suppose you set us up some beef, an' beans, an' peaches an' so on. We ain't et for goin' on two days."

"Sure," Trenton nodded, turning to the shelves. A door creaked; a voice said:

"Raise your hands, men! The law speaking!"

Smoky gulped, wonderingly. Len

shrugged. Slowly their hands came up, and they turned to confront a man of fifty, wearing a cutaway coat, a neat gray beard and rimless glasses. The bulldog .30 in his hand was as steady as a rock.

"Len, son," Smoky sighed, "it seems like a hell of a lot happens in this damn town!"

Trenton snorted, "Gents, this is Judge Coates, in the flesh. Must be one of you boys has been sinnin'—or else owns property. The judge is interested in both."

Coates's eyes gleamed malevolently. "It's you I'm after, Trenton! And you'll find that selling liquor without a license is no joking matter!"

Trenton gaped at him, wonderingly. Meantime, Coates stepped up, laid his gun near the corn liquor, and drew out a fountain pen and some legal-looking papers.

"That's the truth," Smoky growled, darkly. "An' if you think me an' Len is goin' to testify ag'in' Mr. Trenton, yo're crazier'n Bill Andrus is."

Coates smiled, coldly. "You'll return for the trial or I'll have you brought back. And you'll testify against Trenton, or you'll spend eleven months and twenty-nine days along with him in the county jail. The facts here speak for themselves. The whisky was on the counter. I saw the money placed beside it."

"Even so," Len said, softly, "the money was for groceries. An' would it make any difference to you to know that not twenty minutes ago we took a gun away from a man aimin' to kill you?"

"I saw you," Coates said, venomously. "And in doing so you simply made it impossible for me to deal with a mad dog

"Get Me A Fresh Hoss—I'm Moving!"

"What's your name?" he barked, at Len.

Len eyed him reflectively.

"Speak up!" Coates said. "You can identify yourselves and accept witnesses' subpoenas, or stay here in jail until the trial!"

Len shrugged, and passed over his tally book and the receipt he had received for the stockers. Smoky sheepishly dug out a time-stained set of letters addressed to himself, in a schoolgirl hand, at the Pitchfork ranch—Len's father's spread.

"All right," Coates announced, presently, handing them subpoenas. "Trial will be a week from today, at ten in the morning." He swung to Trenton.

"I'm giving you a week, Trenton, because you'll probably want to dispose of your store before going to jail. And I want to be fair."

"I wasn't sellin' that liquor!" Trenton exploded. "I was givin' it away!"

as he deserved! I was ready for him! But under no circumstances could the fact that you did your plain Christian duty be allowed to keep me from doing mine!"

Len smiled, thinly. "You ain't so pious then that it gags you to kill yore own meat?"

Coates eyed him searchingly. "No!" he snapped, finally.

Removing a diamond ring, he scratched a circle-star on the fruit jar, marked the two dollar-bills the same way with his fountain pen, and said:

"I think you men will all recognize this evidence when you see it again. As for you, Trenton, I'll draw up a bond giving your store as security for your appearance." He gathered up the gun and evidence, and marched out.

Smoky moaned, as the door banged after Coates. Len reached for him. "Pull in yore horns!" he advised. "This here's a

fast town, an' you'd better keep that gun where it belongs until we work up to speed. An' you want to remember that Coates gent sure ain't spooky. If he was spyin' in a window while Bill Andrus was here, he knew you an' me was armed. But it didn't seem to scare him none."

"There's no scare in him," Trenton said, bitterly. "He's the lobo they named these Lobo Wells after. He pulled that play to get even with you boys for makin' it impossible for him to shoot Bill in the back in self-defense—an' to get this store. He wants it, same as he wants everything else in sight. An' he'll get it. I'll have to sell out—there ain't nobody to run it for me while I'm in jail."

At the word "jail" Smoky shuddered, and looked desperately up at Len.

"Damn it to hell, Len, don't you realize that once Coates gets us into court he'll give us both barrels of that contempt of court business, an' we'll end up doin' more time'n Mr. Trenton does? I told you we should-a gone straight home!"

"I realize it," Len said, grimly. "Now gimme a chance to think."

He stood silent for ten minutes, rolling and burning cigarettes. Then he looked at Trenton.

"Where does Bill Andrus live? Maybe if we talk to him, we can find out enough to take up ag'in' Coates where he left off."

"You might, son," Trenton said, soberly. "He'll talk to you, all right. An' God knows I wish you luck." He went on with the directions for finding Andrus's spread.

Smoky cut in, dismally. "If we're goin' to all that bother, Len, I'll have to eat first. An' if I eat, it's goin' to take a fresh hoss to carry me. I'm sure goin' to gain weight."

"I'll fix that," Trenton promised. "An' I'll get you fresh hosses."

He began tossing tins of food onto the counter; Len began plying a can opener. And for something like twenty minutes he and Smoky shoveled grub down with both hands. At last Smoky sighed, and smiled apologetically.

"Len, son," he said, "I'm real sorry I was so mean an' peevish. But I was sure ga'nted up an' staggerin' like a locoed cow when we come in here."

Len laughed. "Hell, Smoky, ain't nobody blamin' you for wantin' to shoot Coates. Even gettin' me a full belly ain't changed my feelin's in that respect."

A few minutes later Trenton came with the horses. They shook hands with the old man, mounted, and rode slowly out of town. An hour before sunset they reached Andrus's Flying WA, as pretty a spread as West Texas could boast.

The house and corrals sat under cottonwoods at the far edge of some 600 acres of alfalfa—a big, blue-toned field networked with the reddish lines of irrigation ditches. Behind the alfalfa, grayish hill pasture rolled up ruggedly.

They found Andrus hunkered down dejectedly beside his house, digging peckishly at the hard ground with a stick. He looked up dully as they rode in and dismounted.

"Howdy," Len said, quietly. "We tangled some with Judge Coates after you left, an' thought we'd like to talk things over with you. It turned out, though, it was a good thing you didn't get a gun. He was waiting outside, ready for you."

"Yeah," Smoky snapped, viciously. "An' ready for us!"

Andrus looked at Len inquiringly. Len told him succinctly what had happened, and asked, bluntly:

"What did he do to you?"

Andrus laughed, hoarsely. "Nothin' at all! Just poisoned off 200 head of my cattle since spring, that's all! I was tryin' today to sweat the truth out of him!"

Len scowled, chewing a match reflectively. He'd heard a lot of range-poisoning charges, and all but one or two had turned out to be cases of critters eating poisonous

weeds. And since around two million head of stock of all kinds die every year on the western range of eating poisonous weeds range-poisoning charges are numerous.

"What dealin's have you had with Coates?" Len asked, presently.

"None 'til this year," Andrus said, heavily. "For five years he's been tryin' to lease his alfalfa here. This year he brought the price up to $5,000, him to furnish all labor. Me to furnish water, of course, but I've got plenty of that—two big wells flowin' 500 gallons a minute between 'em, an' a big reservoir. I leased to him, as I could buy feed if necessary an' still make money.

"But that ain't got nothin' to do with it. The thing is he wants this spread. He's got land all around it, an' not much water. An' he's killin' my cows to get it.

"It's damned near got me crazy, boys. I can't sell out. Nobody wants land where cows die like this. Nobody wants the cows, for fear it's some disease. I can't even lease grazin' land. Nobody wants my critters on their range. I can't borrow money, an' I've spent every cent I could raise hirin' men to try to catch them poisoners.

"An' Coates is the only man that'll even think of buyin' me out. That's why I'm so damned sure he's doin' the poisonin'. He offered me three thousand today for the whole place, land, cattle an' water. An' them wells cost more'n that!"

"Sure it ain't poison weeds that's killin' yore critters?" Len asked, softly.

"Nothin' worse'n a little loco on the place," Andrus grunted. "An' them critters don't die slow, like they'd been eatin' loco. One day they're all right. The next, they get feverish, swell up, head for water, an' choke to death."

"Ain't no larkspur here, an' no wild parsnip around that reservoir?"

"Hell, no! You sound like them damned vets! I've had three of 'em in here. They opened up a cow apiece, an' called it chokecherry!"

Len grunted. "You got much of it? It isn't common in Texas."

"Plenty in them hills. But, hell, man, my cows have always et it. If it was chokecherry, they'd a-died of it before now!"

"Poison weeds act different on cows, accordin' to conditions," Len reminded him.

"Sure!" Andrus snapped, impatiently. "But there's men been ridin' in here, spreadin' poison. I've seen their sign often, an' twice my boys picked up them two bodyguards of Coates's on my range. Claimed they was huntin' quail. An' there wasn't any poison on 'em, nor any along their back trail. So what the hell could you do but turn 'em loose ag'in? The damnedest thing is, we ain't never found no poison."

Silence settled down like a fog. At last Andrus broke it, savagely:

"C'mon, boys, to hell with worryin'. Supper's on the table. An' you boys can bed down in the bunkhouse afterwards, if you want. Ain't nobody usin' it, nowadays. We don't have hands here no more."

They washed up, and ate with moody haste. Shortly afterwards, Len and Smoky stumbled off to the bunkhouse, made up cots, and fell into them.

But at ten o'clock Len was wide awake again. For an hour he lay on his elbow, smoking steadily to the accompaniment of Smoky's snores, coyote yips, and the sounds of Bill Andrus moving restlessly around the kitchen.

At last Len swung out of bed, dressed swiftly, and headed for the kitchen. Andrus was still there, slumped down at the table.

"I've been thinkin'," Len said, abruptly. "Lemme see that agreement you signed with Coates, leasin' him your alfalfa."

"Just gives him the alfalfa crop for one year, an' irrigatin' water," Andrus grunted, but he went and got the document.

Len studied it carefully. His eyes gleamed. "How often does Coates irrigate that alfalfa, an' how long will it take to empty out that reservoir?"

Andrus sat up. "He irrigates two-three times a week; his men'll be here in the mornin'. An' I can empty the reservoir overnight."

Len grinned. "Which'd bring Coates out here raisin' hell before noon."

"Talk ahead," Andrus invited, grimly. "I'm listenin'."

Len talked ten minutes. Now and then Andrus nodded. At last he arose.

"All right, Len, I'll chance it. You go back to bed; I'll start the reservoir drainin'. God knows I ain't got much to lose."

Len returned to the bunkhouse, shook Smoky until he eased up on his snoring, and presently dropped off to sleep.

It was broad day when he awakened. An hour later they were hunkered down on a little mound between the two big wells, and on the edge of the reservoir, now a twenty-acre mudhole.

Two hours passed. Then Coates and two men rode up at a dead gallop. Len and Smoky swapped thin smiles, unbuttoned their shirts, and arose.

Coates swung down from his horse, and strode up flanked by the other two, evidently the bodyguards Bill Andrus had mentioned. Then he stopped short, his face purpling, as he recognized Len and Smoky.

"What are you two doing here?" he demanded.

"We been playin' tick-tack-toe, three in a row," Smoky said, innocently.

Len grinned, and Coates looked like he was due to have apoplexy. The bodyguards were a couple of hard-drinking bar flies, to judge from their looks.

Coates choked down his anger. "See here," he snarled, "I've been talking with Andrus, and I'm not going to stand for this nonsense. I know the law—"

"Do you?" Len asked. "I've been wonderin'. Right now yo're out-a yore alfalfa, an' trespassin' on private property. Have you got any legal papers, givin' you a right here?"

Coates paled; the look on his face showed that he didn't have any.

"You better go home an' read that lease Andrus give you," Len grunted. "It don't give you no rights in these wells. It just gives you rights to the water in the reservoir—if any. An' there ain't goin' to be any until you an' me come to terms."

Coates's lips drew into a thin, hard line. He reached for his hip pocket, glanced at his companions, and snapped:

"Turn those wells on!"

"Smoky," Len said, as a .45 flashed into his hand. "You take the hombre with the belly, an' I'll take the one with the Adam's apple. That'll give us both good targets. The one that gets through first can have a free shot at the judge."

Both bodyguards turned a dirty white. Both of them flung up their hands, then turned around, raced for their horses and galloped off. Coates's hand came slowly from his pocket.

"Now, Judge," Len said, evenly, "let's stop this foolin'. You ain't got a legal leg to stand on. But if you really want this water, we'll sell it cheap. All it'll cost you will be the evidence you've got ag'in' old man Trenton."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars for water from these wells, and that's all."

Len laughed. "Money ain't no good to a man in jail, Judge. You heard my terms."

For five minutes Coates stood there, breathing thickly. "All right," he said, finally. "Get Andrus and his wife ready to assign these wells to me, and I'll give you that evidence. I'll have it back here in three hours."

Coates mounted and rode off, with Smoky glowering after him.

"Damn it, Len," he growled. "We could at least a-shot them guards!"

"You'll get yore snoot full of gun smoke before this is over," Len promised him. "Now you get for the house. Bring the Andruses back here, with plenty of grub

and pails to hold water. Also, a couple shovels, a pick and all the weapons handy. We can't leave these wells unguarded, an' we can't leave the Andruses unguarded, either. An' if you think Coates is goin' to turn over that evidence without a fight, yo're crazy!"

Smoky raced off, and was back in half an hour with the Andruses following him in a buckboard wagon loaded down with materials for a siege. Andrus grinned triumphantly as Len told him what had happened.

For two solid hours they sweat steadily at the fort, grubbing a hole about four feet by six in the adobe soil, and piling up the excavated dirt for a parapet.

Coates came on time. Presently he rode into sight alone, carrying a briefcase, dismounted and walked up to where the four were waiting. He glanced at them, then at the dugout, and smiled amusedly.

"You flatter me!" he said.

"Maybe we are overratin' you," Len answered. "You got that evidence?"

Coates nodded, opened the briefcase, displaying the marked fruit jar and dollar bills, then drew out the water rights assignments and his pen. Len and the Andruses concentrated on the document; Smoky concentrated wistfully on the half-full fruit jar. Finally the paper was signed and passed back to Coates. He nodded with satisfaction, buttoning it inside his cutaway. Suspicion cut Len like a knife.

"Something damned fishy here," he snapped, to Andrus. "You folks get into that hole. Smoky, gather in that briefcase. Coates, you stand right where you are!"

"Certainly," Coates smiled, blandly. "I had no intention of leaving."

Narrow-eyed, Len backed into the dugout, beside the other three. The next minute was a year long. Then men began showing their heads cautiously behind brush, hummocks and mesquite trees. But still Coates stood there, smiling.

Suddenly Andrus groaned, white-lipped, and looked around at Len.

"He's foxed us, somehow. Them ain't gunslingers. They're some of my best friends—some of the best citizens in the country. Put yore guns down, boys. Come on out, Blount! We'll talk this over peaceable," said Andrus.

A big, ruddy-faced cowman strolled out, sheathing a hogleg. Man after man came into the open, until eight in all were grouped around Coates. Coates looked at them. "Gentlemen, you saw how these people tried to force me into a highly illegal transaction in order to regain water which is mine by every moral right. Now I think we should prevail upon Mr. and Mrs. Andrus to turn these two criminals over to the law."

"Go on," Blount grunted, impatiently. "An' talk English."

Coates stiffened, but went on: "And I think you will agree that I'm justified in keeping this assignment of water rights, and in asking your aid in recovering that briefcase."

The battle light was in Len's eyes as he set the briefcase upon the parapet, and stepped up beside it.

"You see," he said, softly, "Brother Coates here has poisoned off about $15,000 worth of Bill's critters this season—an' he done it in such a damn slick way that I don't believe the law can touch him. He's the slickest lobo I ever met."

"Go on," Blount said.

Len nodded. "Like I said, the law can't touch Coates. So Bill an' me laid out what seemed at the time a mighty smooth little stunt. We aimed to make him swap that evidence for water rights.

"An' just as soon as we got it, we was goin' to turn right around an' sell it back to the judge ag'in—or, leastwise, destroy it in his presence—in return for $15,000 to pay Andrus for his cows. We figured, you see, that Coates would pay up rather'n have us take our story an' that evidence

to the governor. Even Coates knows law enough to know it's sure as hell illegal for an officer of the law to give evidence back to a couple criminals in return for some personal water rights!"

"That's preposterous! I never poisoned anybody's cattle!" snapped Coates.

Len walked slowly up to Coates. "You ain't done no poison', huh? How come yo're so willin' to buy this place, if you don't know what's killin' them cows?

"You knew there was chokecherry here. You knew, same as every cattleman does, that it ain't particularly dangerous to cows with plenty of good grazin'— an' deadly to a half-starved critter that fills an empty belly with it! An' you fixed it so Andrus's cows wouldn't get much but chokecherry!

"Why did you spend five years tryin' to lease that alfalfa, an' finally pay more'n it was worth? You did it to make them cows eat chokecherry—an' because you knew alfalfa is a natural antidote for the prussic acid in chokecherry! You ain't the only man around here that ever read a book, Coates, even if you are the only man that talks like one!

"An' yore slickest trick, Coates, was yore dumbest one! You sent them bodyguards of yore'n in here ridin' around, to make Bill think they was spreadin' poison, and to take his mind off'n the chokecherry the vets told him about. How long will they hold up when we put the screws on them?"

The cowmen gathered around Coates grimly. He saw in their slit-eyes that the scales of swift justice were trembling against him. Panic-stricken, he snatched at his hip pocket and leaped toward the briefcase. Smoky met him—with a straight left and a slashing right, one, two. He dropped, the gun sliding from his fingers. Smoky kicked it away.

Blount laughed, reached for Coates's beard, and yanked him to his feet.

"You want us to take him off yore hands, Forke?"

Len grinned. "Providin' you'll see to it he settles with Andrus. Of course, if he don't want to settle, we've still got that evidence for the attorney general an' the governor, an' eight witnesses that he traded it for water rights."

"I'll—I'll settle," Coates said, faintly.

Blount stepped forward, carrying Coates over his arm like a slicker in dry weather.

"Forke," he said, extending his hand. "I'm sure proud to have met up with you an' yore partner. It ain't that we-all didn't sympathize with Bill an' his wife as much as you did—but, damn it, we just didn't see the light. An' we wouldn't have come in here today except that Coates made it appear Bill'd gone clean loco."

Smiling, self-consciously, Len and Smoky shook hands all around with the cowmen. Then the posse gathered up Coates and prepared to get going. Mrs. Andrus, hugging her husband, turned brimming eyes to Len.

"Son," she said, shakily, "If Bill ever does pass on sudden-like, you'll sure be welcome to camp on my doorstep, if for nothing more than gratitude."

Len grinned, queerly; for once he had nothing to say. She and Andrus went on with the posse, leaving Len and Smoky watching silently until the party was out of sight.

"Doggone it, Len," Smoky sighed, at last, "here we go an' get ourselves an' Trenton out-a jail, the Andruses back on their feet, an' Judge Coates in plenty of trouble —an' all, so help me, without one shot fired! It ain't natural. It scares a man."

He looked up, hopefully. "But there's still about a pint left in that can of evidence."

Len laughed. "A pint wouldn't do me for a beginnin'! We'd better ride right in an' see Trenton, an' get fixed up for a real celebration. I'm entitled to one, Smoky. Hell, I'm as good as engaged!"

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Burnt Biscuits and Hell Fire, but Some of These Sourdoughs Know a Thing or Two About Poker!

A Sucker for Poker

By HAROLD de POLO

AS THERE is now considerable frost in my hair, the same also beginning to peter out, it occurs to me that most any day from this on the Great Dealer might come along and ask me to cash in my stack of chips. I will be ready and interested like always, of course, to buck this new game at which I am asked to sit in. I am saying this, I would like to explain, because I do not want my friends and enemies to think that Mackenzie Jack is making a squawk. But before I am invited to leave the table for the last time there is just one thing I am going to get off my conscience.

Namely and to wit, I would like to tell about the cold facts behind this mistruth under which I have now been living for what will be eight years come next ice break-up. I would like to make it plain to each and every sourdough in Alaska, that has known me on the trails and in the camps, of how come it happened that I gave up the honest industry of poker for this effete pastime called bridge.

I have suffered long enough and I know positive that Ben Phelps now makes his headquarters in New York and that Luther Buell has quit the North country for keeps, being in what I understand is a much more tropical clime.

So I aim to speak my mind.

I GUESS the commencement of this pernicious sin that eventually overtook me started the very first time I ever laid eyes on Ben Phelps. I can't deny that.

I had mushed into Nome from Forty Mile somewhat fast and furious, it is a safe bet to make, having a bag of dust that was not too light to be ashamed of and having heard that Yukon Ike and Saltpork Peters and Rainbow Sweeny was in town and in funds, and if there is three other devotees of poker anywheres on the globe to equal this ring-tailed, flea-bitten, moss-backed trio of fun-loving gents I would hanker to be told about it.

Having fed and put up my huskies, my moccasins just naturally gravitated me in the direction of the Square Deal, that den of iniquity or salon of amusement—howsoever you look at it—that was operated by Skagway George Lawton. Skagway never was critical about the nice and exact meaning of words, I confess, but at least he didn't serve knockout drops and the dealers at his various games of chance must have been warned not to be too cute with any seasoned sourdoughs. Besides, I go on record as affirming he served the best red-eye in Nome, which same wise custom gave him quite a clientele. I always did suspicion it wasn't as secure a place as a Sunday school for a chechako, although you can't rightfully say this was my business.

Leastways, it hadn't been my business until that fateful night about twelve years back.

Preparatory to annexing a table and indulging in trying to better your hand by calling for cards—or standing pat if you so desired—me and Yukon and Saltpork and Rainbow was sampling some of this mellow pain-killer I've mentioned. We must have had our feet on the rail for about so long as it takes each man to buy a round, it seems to me, when Saltpork Peters, I remember it was, happened to twist that turkey-gobbler neck of his around and glance way over at what you could term a secluded corner of the room where sometimes nefarious doings went on.

"Burnt biscuits an' hell fire," said Saltpork, using his manifestation of opprobrium and disgust, "but if Lute Buell ain't got holt of another pore sucker."

My own optics, following those of Saltpork, told me that he had spoken naught but the sad and unbiased truth.

LUTHER BUELL and two lesser buzzards most certainly had a victim in their toils. I did not have to look at the aforesaid innocent victim to tell this, either; I could tell that by looking at that polecat's eyes. His eyes always and under regular normal conditions looked like those of a dead fish, but my ability to read human faces taught me by many hours at poker tables had allowed me to conclude that the more and easier Lute was winning the more like those of a defunct fish did his orbs become. They looked like those of a very dead fish, now, and I know about fishes. I have fed plenty of them to my dogs.

I then, sort of out of casual curiosity, took a look at the victim, and he seemed like a decent, square-shooting, fair-to-average young lad very fresh off the boat. Although I have seen numerous of these boys go on the rocks when they hit the north before they even got an outfit together, I couldn't help tossing off my whiskey a trifle rapid and saying with what was maybe a sigh:

"Oh, well, Saltpork, there is a chance that it will save the kid many future trials and tribulations. Perhaps he will save enough or else be able to borrow it to freight himself back home."

Just about one drink time later, howsoever, I took another look at him when the game broke up and he started walking toward the bar, and I knew right off that this youngster is not the kind to quit, lay down or even ask for assistance. He was smiling sort of a rueful smile, like as if he had decided the joke was on himself, when he stepped up to the mahogany and ordered his poison.

"Stranger," I could not help saying to him, "how about joining a few old-timers and letting them welcome you to this great and glorious north country?"

"I'd like it a lot, gentlemen," the kid

grinned back at us, "if you'll let me buy the first round and let me just take one other one with you. I will give you two good reasons for that qualification," he explains. "The bankroll is somewhat short and on the other hand a pair of ryes usually satisfy me in times of slight mental perturbation."

"Mister, that's mighty fair talk," said Yukon Ike, who I might mention is not prone to carelessly take up with stray hombres especially if chechakos and youthful ones at that. "Step right up and name your hankering."

"In my brief travels I have found it wise to do as the Old Romans do whenever possible," he said, nodding to the bartender and signifying that he will sample our brand and thereby somewhat further endearing himself to our quartet.

We learned, in the conversation that ensued and flowed pleasantly, that his name was Ben Phelps, that he was out of college less than a year, that he had navigated to Alaska to make his fortune, that of course and as per schedule he had a girl back home, and that he had dropped his stake of nearly four thousand dollars to Luther Buell and his brace of vultures. The

change from the five dollar gold piece he plumb ruined in paying for our round of libations, it turned out after some real direct questioning, was all the kid had left.

"Bub," I said to him, without beating about the bush, "I and the boys here is always honored to grubstake a gent that lays his cards on the table like you have."

"Prospectors an' Poverty," swore Saltpork, "but we certainly be, Ben."

"Divil take me if it ain't the truth," said Rainbow, going for his poke instanter.

"Crimus, yes," said Yukon, his Adam's apple popping the way it always does when he has to do a good deed in the open.

"You see how the boys feel, bub," I said to him. "You reckon a thousand from each of us will start you going?" I asked, me not having to be a lightning calculator to figure up this would cover the amount he had lost to Luther.

BEN reddened up like a warm sunset and you could see that his eyes was a little moist, but he shook his head and gave us another of his aboveboard grins.

"Gentlemen, that offer does me a heap of good. You might say it renews my courage," he said. "I've got to refuse it, and if any four men will understand why I've got to refuse it you four are the ones. I came up here to make good on my own, and you'll admit I'd be a pretty poor specimen if I reached out for help on my first setback. I'll admit it may seem as if I need a nurse, but I've got to blunder along in my own way. I'm grateful for the offer —you know that—and if ever I need a bunk or a meal or get real down-and-out I'll know where to come. Excuse the verbosity, gentlemen, but I wanted to explain. I *will* take that drink I mentioned before I wander along on my way," he ended up.

Whilst we was imbibing the same I did some rapid thinking, and I herewith wish to proclaim that it is not customarily the habit of Mackenzie Jack to butt in on another man's game. Nevertheless, I had cottoned to this boy and I had never been able to make this identical remark about Luther Buell.

"Bub," I said, "I will intimate that maybe that game you sat in on was not altogether on the up-and-up. I do not mean to imply for a fact that marked cards or unadulterated crooked dealing was done, but I do infer to myself that perhaps Lute and his buzzards used signs and played you for a sucker between the three of them. You

was caught right in the vortex, you might say."

"I believe I began to suspicion that toward the end of the game," said Ben. "I always was a sucker for poker, though, even in college, and I guess it's up to me to take my medicine."

Me and Yukon nad Saltpork and Rainbow nodded our complete understanding, for you have got to respect an hombre like Ben and I do not consider it proper etiquette to press him. Even so, I could not help throwing out a hint.

"I notice that you do not go heeled, bub," I said. "I have a very ancient .45 that has done very honorable service in its day, and it is still in superior working order and at the disposal for loan to a friend. I do not think that the community would be irritated unduly or apt to make an arrest if Mr. Buell was perforated by some outraged person who had been legally if not ethically relieved of his stake. Mr. Buell," I added on slowly, letting my other words and the following sink in, "is not too quick on the draw. Local opinion is to the effect that he has been most fortunate in surviving this rigorous climate as long as he has."

"Thanks again," said Ben Phelps, downing the remains of his second drink, "but I've got other business to attend to. I've got to get me a job. I'll be chasing along now. Cheer up, maybe I'll run into Mr. Buell again sometime, when I've got another bankroll, and take him over the jumps right at poker. Good night, gentlemen."

DUE to me and Yukon and Saltpork and Rainbow having invited Ben to join us, we not being notorious for mingling with chechakos and young ones at that, this above incident I have recounted more or less had aroused the interest of the older sourdoughs and other inhabitants. It was what you might term news. This was also because Nosey Al, the bartender at Skagway George's, was a hound for gossip and a lynx-eyed microphone for picking up any whisper of same that occurred in his vicinity. He had heard me offer my Colt to Ben, it seems, and he had not been bashful of telling it to other visitors at his counter whilst the four of us was fondling the pasteboards later on at a table in the more quiet atmosphere of another room.

When we had finished our highly educational little session, during which Yukon and Rainbow had learned their lesson from me and Saltpork, the first thing that happened when we moseyed back to the bar was to have old Bonanza Frank clap me on the shoulder and say:

"Well, Jack, you had better offer to donate your .45 to a chechako that ain't yellow in the future. Let me buy a potation to a different luck next time."

You cannot become mad with Bonanza Frank. He is a very old man and a privileged character, and it has become the custom to humor him when he thinks he is making bright remarks. Notwithstanding, I said to him:

"No, Frank, you are wrong. The kid is not yellow. He aims to take his revenge on Lute in another poker game when he obtains himself another bankroll." Then I said, "Yes, Frank, you are right. We will have a drink on you."

You have got to bear in mind that in the far places, as they say, and in my belief particularly in Alaska, an item that would not make an inside page in a country weekly is talked about in the bars and dance halls and gambling emporiums for lo, many a moon. So when Bonanza Frank had opined that Ben Phelps was yellow it became a question of somewhat serious moment. Some said yes and some said no, and I understand that argufying waxed hot and heavy.

I was not greatly disturbed myself, still standing pat and content on my ability to read human faces, and my reading of Ben's gray eyes and of his grin had informed me to my satisfaction that it had not been a matter of the wrong color in his make-up that had caused him to refrain from going after Luther Buell.

I WAS borne out in this the very next day. The snow had come early that season, and caught even those who savvied unawares, and like you will always find under such circumstances there was a strong bull market for workable huskies. The supply most certainly did not exceed the demand or even half cover it, and the Indians and some Canucks was doing what you could say was a thriving business as human freight movers. Grub has got to be taken over the pass come snow or high water or hell, and you cannot say that rates are cheap. It is a lush time for these Crees and Frenchies, but I do not envy or even accuse them of usury. It is hard work.

The following morning about third drink time, more or less, I was in Skagway George's having one with this same Bonanza Frank when I see coming down the street an hombre carrying the biggest load I have looked at that season and maybe any other season.

Bonanza noticed this as well, for the old rascal looks out of the window and says:

"Jack, there's a lad, whosoever he be, that's toting mighty close to what I could pack not so many years ago."

Which I did not contradict him on, Frank always having been a thin and wiry ostrich more noted for his speed and team driving propensities than for putting a tump line on his head that cut in too heavy.

"Frank, that's the kid you said was yellow last night," I said, just getting sure of this identity myself.

Bonanza has been a cantankerous party, in these later years, and he dotes on being right. The admiration he had had on his face, before he had known it was Ben Phelps, becomes a frown. Then he suddenly gets all brightened up again.

"He'll show yellow before he's gone a mile with that load, Jack," he said.

I will admit that I had misgivings myself, not that Ben would show yellow but that his carcass would just not be able to do what his spirit urged. It takes a man used to the North country, a man in training, to do what Ben was trying to do. So I said to Frank, and I did not mean it as hedging on my bet when I said so:

"No, Bonanza, not that son. He will never show yellow. He may drop, but he will get up again. He may drop again, but he will still get up again and go on again. He will keep on doing this until he simply cannot get up. You will notice, Frank, that he did not take any of the softer jobs that maybe his college course in higher learning would have won for him, these now being plenty because every able-bodied and even half-invalid males is out on this gold rush. No, Bonanza, that son will never show yellow. I call to your attention once more that he headed wide-open-eyed into the tough job."

This grizzled and ornery toad of a Bonanza, of course, would not agree with me, he having copious company in asserting that Ben had bit off more than he could properly masticate, and I did not have the chance to stay around Skagway George's at that immediate moment to see what the results would be. Yukon and Rainbow were heading for Dawson, they having the desire for travel, and my own feet also beginning to feel the itch for the trail I persuaded Saltpork that Fort Macpherson on the Mackenzie after which river the boys have labeled me in consequence of it being my favorite stamping ground, might be an interesting place to visit.

I WILL not go into detail about how we dallied on the way and how we had various pleasant and not unprofitable seances at poker with various redoubtable old-timers we met. I will only state that it took us almost four months to get there, and I will at the same time mention that it was a very happy arrival for me because the first sourdough we ran into when we sashayed up to the bar in Sandy's Place was Bert Wheeler and Bert said to me as we had our drinks:

"Well, Jack, you certainly was right about that Ben Phelps galoot. I was in Skagway George's that morning when you had your difference of opinion concerning

him with Bonanza Frank. I can tell you most positively that this young chechako did not show yellow. He stuck on that freight job and he made them Injuns and them Canucks look like a bunch of busted flushes. I never see no man carry loads like that before, Jack, honest. Every one was as big if not bigger than that first one, and I suppose that maybe this is because I understand he was quite some hombre at his college institution at football and wrestling. I would not, anyway, like to oppose him on the gridiron or on the mat. Yes, he made nearly eighteen hundred dollars, they tell me, in about two months, and I guess he would of more than doubled that, what with rates getting higher, if he had not found out that Lute Buell was hitting out for Fairbanks one day. He——"

"If they put that lad in the calaboose for taking my advice about perforating Luther I am taking the trail without having one more drink," I broke in with what I suspicion was some heat.

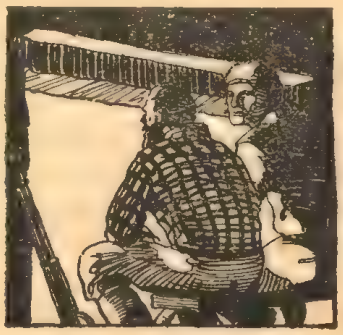
"Calaboose? Ben Phelps? Perforating Lute Buell?" said Bert, kind of puzzled. "Shucks, no, Jack. He's to Fairbanks now, Ben is, where he follered Lute for more revenge. Got a job playing some sort of mechanic nurse to airplanes in that new outfit. Says he sees a greater future than ever in the business, here in Alaska. Why, he didn't get any more sore than he did the first time, this trip when he dropped his eighteen hundred to Lute in a crazy game of two-handed draw. Oh, he's a sucker for poker, all right."

"Someone should have stopped him before he started," I said after a minute, first having to fortify myself before I could trust my language when I thought of that slimy and obnoxious reptile taking a second stake from Ben.

"Try it sometime yourself, Mr. Mackenzie Jack." said Bert with a drawl.

I WOULD like to verify the fact as strong as you would like to have me do so that Ben Phelps could be classified truthful for the sucker for poker that Bert Wheeler had so stated him to be.

I did not see Ben again for nearly a year since the first night we had become acquainted at Skagway George's, but in my footloose and rambling wanderings I heard sufficient news about him. All of this was to his credit, and I knew that I had not been wrong when I had suggested that I and Yukon and Saltpork and Rainbow



stake him to what in these days even up here they call a grand apiece. The boy was a worker and not a waster, and none of the jobs I was told he tackled could you by any of this stretching of the imagination say was soft ones. He finally, I was so informed, went up into the wilder trapping country and was trying to drum up trade amongst the individual fur men to have their supplies delivered by plane and their skins brought out by the same method, this not being common at the period of which I now tell like it is today. You might call Ben a pioneer at that game, I guess.

I have said that he was not a waster and I still stick to it, although there is some who will perchance put forth the argument that an hombre who continuously and time after time will lose his money to Luther Buell can be termed one. I do not agree. A sucker he can be called, maybe; but a waster, no. All money spent at poker teaches something, and when you absorb knowledge you are not a waster. I do not say that money spent at bridge could be bracketed in the same category, neither. Please remember that.

Yes, you will judge from the above—

and you will be as right as aces back-to-back if you have them when and if you indulge in stud—that Ben kept on in what I deemed this vain pursuit of attempting to procure his revenge on Lute. Whenever he got a bankroll together he hunted up this rapacious and fish-eyed vulture and proceeded to drop it to him with neatness and dispatch. He would even spend half of his stake, I understand, just on traveling expenses to get to where Lute was so that he might present him with the balance of it. I understand, furthermore, that Lute did not any more have to even resort to chicanery in order to relieve Ben of his currency, he having what is known as the Indian sign on the lad in an ordinary straight game.

The next time I saw Ben, which happened to be down at Seward where he had gone on some of this freight-by-plane business, I inferred, I put it up to him straight:

"Bub," I said, "I am coming out cold and at the risk of offending you and saying that I do not think you will ever do anything but drop your dust when you buck Luther Buell. Bub," I went on to suggest, "did it ever occur to you to maybe sit in at some game in which Lute is not sitting in at? There is a chance," I went on to hopefully and in all sincerity state, "that your poker luck would turn with Luther not being one of those present. Whether you like it or not, bub, you have got to admit to one as concerned in your welfare as I am that he has you jinxed."

But Ben put down the second drink we was having together, than which he rarely absorbed more, and I saw that glint come into his eyes that you see in the eyes of prospectors and some inventors of perpetual motion machines and perhaps lunatics.

"Jack," he said to me, "don't you worry. I'll get it all back and more. Maybe he's got the Indian sign on me now, but my day is coming. I can *feel* it. I'll take Lute Buell sometime, when my luck turns, for the biggest win that's ever been made in Alaska. Watch me."

You cannot say anything to a man in that mental condition, and so I did not. I only said:

"Well, bub, it is possible to make the biggest win ever made in Alaska from Lute, for he carries more cash spoils with him than any man I have ever known and he has plenty in reserve. I wish you luck."

Wishing Ben luck against Lute, though, was like wishing you could fill an inside straight, let us say and put it somewhat mildly, about ten times in succession.

I will not be a waster myself in the respect of spending any more time in telling you how this obsession to take Luther at poker kept on riding Ben. Suffice it to say, I will only remark, it kept getting worse and worse as the months and as the seasons went on, and after about three years had gone by I and Saltpork once figured up that Ben had parted with close to twenty thousand dollars to Lute in his determined effort to get back his losses. It was a thing that was known and talked about all over Alaska, by now, and I had to take considerable joshing and kidding about Ben myself seeing that everyone was aware that I was especially friendly toward the lad.

IN THE meantime, Ben was not doing too badly in other ways, he and this airship pilot he had teamed up with having bought a plane of their own and started the Phelps-Benson Company. Ben told me that the profits were small but enough, and that when he got Alaska more freight-by-air-minded, the way he put it, he expected big doings. He might even have two or three ships in a few years, he said, just as soon as he got the capital. When this happened, he calculated to take a trip back to the States and get married and return with his bride. The only trouble with all this was that Ben continued trying to get that same capital from Lute Buell every time he saved up enough from his own share of the Phelps-Benson dividends.

But things occurred quicker than had been expected, and it was this way.

There was a new gold strike down Anvik way, and you could state without falsehood

that it certainly came at a propitious and appropriate time for Ben. He had about twelve hundred dollars, he had told me, and he had also mentioned that he had one of these gambler's hunches that it was going to win a big stake for him. This meant, of course, that he figured he was going to at last take Luther with this stack of chips. When he heard of this gold strike, howsoever—and with me and Yukon urging him on—he decided to have a crack at it. This step was helped along, I must admit, with Luther not being in camp at the moment and not looked for to put in an appearance for about another week.

The next thing I heard, some two months later, was that Ben Phelps had located a paying claim and had sold it to one of these big mining concerns for exactly eighty thousand dollars for himself and eighty thousand dollars for his pardner Cliff Benson that he had insisted on cutting in fifty-fifty on this deal even though it was outside of their airship company.

I do not have to tell you, I do not suppose, that there was some despair as well as joy in camp when this news about Ben came in. He had got to be a pretty popular hombre with about one and all, he being a white man in each and every way including never throwing down a busted sourdough when he had anything in his poke, and bets was sadly made that naturally Luther would annex the better portion of this eighty thousand dollars. I do not deny, neither, that this was my own opinion, provided of course that Luther was still on hand on *terra firma* when Ben got back to camp from the diggings.

I know and I repeat that it is not what some of these Britishers up here call cricket to horn in on another man's play, and I am not one who is under the impression he is his brother's keeper, neither. Nevertheless and notwithstanding, I have said that I liked Ben and had taken sort of a close personal interest in him, and I also told myself that there was a girl back home to think of. All this being so, I say without shame that I seriously contemplated using my same .45 that I had once offered Ben on the same person I had hoped Ben would use it on. In fact, I wore my ancient iron sort of low in the holster and took to inhabiting Skagway George's right regular waiting for Luther to show up.

LUTE must have sneaked in the back way, howsoever, or else maybe he had seen Skagway down to the hotel where he stopped, because Skagway George came to me one morning and said:

"Jack, I have some interesting information to convey. I saw Lute Buell last night. I will be brief and to the point. Lute does not want to take no one single possible chance of missing up on that eighty grand that Ben Phelps will probably mush into town with before long. Lute has offered me ten grand—ten hard thousand dollars, all in advance—if I will see that just one specific pack of cards is handed to him, in his first game with Ben, when Ben or him calls for a new deck."

"Why do you not take him up, Skagway?" I asked, feeling in an ugly mood and having my Colt right handy and having, I will confess, sort of worked myself up into a pleasant pitch of excitement about using it. "I did not think a marked deck was altogether unknown, in certain circumstances, to some patrons of this establishment," I ended up with for good measure.

Skagway George did not go to his iron. He kept both hands on the bar. He looked me in the eye and said:

"Because I know that you are interested in this Ben Phelps, that is why. The other whys are because, although Lute will no doubt secure this roll one way or another, I do not wish to be mixed up in it. This Ben lad is too popular, also, and I do not wish to incur the enmity of you or Yukon or Saltpork or Rainbow or any of the veteran sourdoughs. I have always tried for your trade and I have always played square with you. Jack, you cannot deny that."

"No, I cannot deny it, Skagway," I said, reaching for the bottle and pouring myself

another drink as a sort of a vague thought not yet completely formulated came into my brain.

"So just remember that I have told you this and will not be mixed up in any dirty work, Jack," said Skagway.

"Just a minute, Skagway," I said. "I would like to retire with you for some conversation to the sanctity of your private chamber. I see that Luther Buell is not among those present at this moment, but when he does answer the roll-call here the next time I do not wish him to be reminded that I have had powwow with you. I am loath to mean it as a threat, but truly I have one of these here intuitions that I would without any hesitancy whatsoever use my trusted and faithful old Colt on the hombre that peached to Mr. Buell about this *tête-a-tête* I and you are about to enjoy. This includes Nosey Al, I might mention."

I said those latter words very distinctly as I led Skagway George away.

I WILL at this stage of the proceedings beg to say that I do not think I can be blamed for mentioning that I was a disinterested party, as far as my personal self was concerned, in my sudden taking up with that dead-faced, fish-eyed, marble-

hearted piece of low-down humanity called Luther Buell. That goes for Yukon Ike and for Saltpork Peters, too, and it would have gone for Rainbow Sweeny as well had this same old he-walrus not been away on a trip to Fairbanks.

Yes, I and Yukon and Saltpork actually although with maybe malice aforethought was seen in public, right out in the open, imbibing liquid refreshment with Luther Buell. We was, later on, fully and widely witnessed sitting in at a friendly little four-handed game of draw in this same emporium operated by Skagway George. This, I must admit, had not been such a difficult task to accomplish, for Luther had always more or less hankered to associate with what I might term, truthfully letting all modesty slide, as the better element amongst the sourdoughs. Besides, I and Yukon and Saltpork, I cannot deny, had likewise been diplomatic about this matter of allowing him to mingle with us. He did not, I was and am still convinced, at the moment suspect us of harboring any ulterior motives or designs.

We kept on playing our little friendly game with him, with the stakes not too serious or apt to be embarrassing, for the next few days. I and Yukon and Saltpork seesawed back and forth, but when we received private information to the effect that Ben had completed all details with the mining company and could be expected in Nome almost any minute, we did not take our hands too carefully and sort of managed to drop to Luther something like fourteen hundred dollars between us. We behaved, although in a good-natured fashion, as if we did not like this so heartily, and we threw out the hint we might stand for having the stakes raised. To which, I will report, Luther was awful agreeable.

It was about this time, after we had dealt a few hands at this higher limit, that Ben Phelps breezed into Skagway George's, and Ben was loaded for bear with that glint in his eye and so said without any delay whatsoever:

"Hi, Lute! Got a big roll with you? This is the occasion when I take you to the cleaner. Me? I have got close to eighty thousand dollars in my poke."

"I think I can match it and then some, if necessary," said Luther Buell with one

of his quiet smiles that I have got to confess is always also very polite.

"Burnt biscuits an' hell fire," said Saltpork, "but I would like a whack at that formidable grubstake myself, Ben. Sure, come on and join the party."

"Crimus, yes, so would I," said Yukon.

"The same goes for Mackenzie Jack, bub," I came in. "Yes, by all means tote up a fifth chair. Luther here has been topping my hands all evening, and maybe you will change the luck."

"The luck won't change for you, Jack, I'm sorry to say," grinned Ben, drawing up his chair. "No, it's my night to howl, gentlemen."

"I will admit you having it coming to you, Ben," said Luther, as pleasant as always, and then whilst we had one drink to Ben's success down Anvik way the five-handed game began.

I WILL not pester you with about the first sixty minutes or more of that session, except to say that we was all playing fairly tight but Ben, who was betting them high, wide and handsome. Luck still seemed to be against Ben, and I was not doing too well myself, but Luther was taking in some nice pots. To start things and sort of to pave the way, you might say, I had called for new decks a couple of times, like it is the privilege of any man, to try and change the luck as I said. I could see Luther's eyes beginning to get more like those of a dead fish than ever, and I knew that he was contented with his good fortune in this honest game yet that he nevertheless was anxious to make a real big killing on that eighty thousand Ben had.

So I said, with sort of a yawn and a glance at both Yukon Ike and Saltpork Peters:

"I wish these stakes was high. I feel like some real excitement, this particular evening."

"Put 'em up to the sky," instantly said Ben. "Eh, Lute, it's all right with you, isn't it?"

"I am always agreeable to anything any players cares to have go into effect," said Luther courteously.

The limit was raised to a five hundred dollar one, and after just two hands of this, in which Luther dropped about three thousand to Ike and Saltpork, he took his turn to call for a new deck, asking Ike to hold up for a minute as the deal was with him.

Ike dealt with the most recent deck and there was nothing much doing, Saltpork taking it without much opposition with three treys against aces and eights held by Luther. I noticed, though, that Luther had been following the backs of the cards most closely with those fish-eyes of his, and that they now became so very dead that it definitely signified he was most thoroughly satisfied.

The deal came to me then, but I did not call for a new deck. I called for a drink all round, insisting we had it coming to us, and when Skagway George himself honored us by serving this trayful of libations he happened to slip and spill a glass of it down the back of the neck of Luther Buell.

"Hell," said Luther, twisting his neck around, which is the nearest I ever heard him come to swearing.

"Cheer up, Lute," I said, as he finished drying himself with his handkerchief and I was by then dealing the cards, "I have often heard it said that a man who has a drink spilt over him in a poker game likewise is going to have luck poured over him."

"Yes, I have heard that myself," said Luther, now having four cards on the table and waiting for the fifth.

Ben, who was sitting to the left of me, had done his anteing with a hundred dollar chip, and when Saltpork picked up his cards he raised this an even hundred. Luther Buell, very quietly, then tossed in two one hundred dollar chips and another of five hundred:

"My cards simply cry that I raise the limit, gentlemen," said this vulture.

Ike dropped out, quite rapid about it, but

I came along with seven hundred dollars and stayed.

"Your five hundred and five hundred more, Lute," said Ben.

It was now Saltpork's turn to throw down his cards, but Luther softly slid in just one thousand dollars.

"You are seen and raised five hundred more, Ben," he said.

"Mackenzie Jack knows full well when he is beyond his depth," I said pleasantly as I let my cards fall. "You two ring-tailed and famous old warriors can go to it, and may the best man win."

"Too bad the limit is five hundred," said Ben, as he also parted with a thousand, thereby seeing Lute's raise and going him still five hundred better.

LUTHER BUELL hesitated for a moment. He always spoke quiet and gentle, but his voice was more so now. I detected the suspicion of a taunt in it when he said:

"I am always receptive to such suggestion, Ben, but the trouble is I seldom find those with courage enough to raise the limit to a really interesting sum."

Ben came back quick as a flash, and he certainly did not show a poker face when he said mighty eagerly:

"You've found one now, Lute. Go to it. The sky's the limit if you say so."

"Which suits me," said Luther, putting in one five hundred dollar chip and then, more slowly, just ten of these same things. "You are raised five thousand dollars, Ben," he added.

"Your five and ten more—*ten thousand more,*" said Ben Phelps in not exactly as calm a voice, I must admit, as Luther could use.

Remember that not a card had as yet been drawn, but Luther Buell calmly said:

"I always did believe in fattening the pot before the draw, Ben. Your ten and ten more. I am speaking in thousands, of course."

Ben Phelps hesitated for a long, long minute, and he was frowning most thoughtfully like a man doing some grave debating with himself. I do not know what he was thinking, naturally, but of course he thought he held the winning hand already just like Luther Buell thought so. Ben must have figured, it seemed to me, that already he would win back all he had lost to Lute if he could but take this one pot.

Every other game in the room had stopped, by now, and you could certainly say that our table was the vital center of attraction, and still Ben hesitated. Then, all at once, he sort of let out a sudden smile and brought out his poke and flung it onto the middle of the board:

"You'll find in the neighborhood of sixty thousand dollars left in there, Lute," he said, "and I'm seeing your ten and raising you the balance, whatever it is. You agreed to call the sky the limit and I'm reaching to it."

I will give Luther Buell credit. He did not bat one of those fish-eyes of his. He looked at his own cards once more, and I could tell that he was also gazing at the backs of Ben's cards as if to sort of reassure himself, you might say. Then he said:

"We both must have pat hands, eh?"

"I don't know what you have, but I know what I have. You're right it's a pat hand," said Ben.

Luther seemed further satisfied with this statement, and as if he was betting no more than a small chip he tossed his own war chest onto the table and said:

"I am seeing you, Ben. There is enough and more in there to cover your bet."

"Cards, gentlemen?" I asked, doing the ethical thing.

"None," said Ben.

"None here," said Lute.

And then, for the first time, I saw Luther Buell lose that fish-eyed and dead-faced poise. No, he did not show it on his features. Instead, he showed it by his actions. It was up to Ben to show his hand first, seeing he had been called, but Luther did not give him the chance to do this:

"Ben, you asked for it," said Luther, tossing his cards face up on the table.

"There is a king high straight flush in diamonds."

Ben Phelps, strange to say, now became the calmest I had ever saw him in a poker game:

"Yes, that is a nice hand, Lute," he said.

"I thought so right along," said Luther, reaching over and starting to drag in the spoils.

"But hold on," said Ben. "I have a nicer hand. I have a straight flush in spades, ace high. A royal straight flush, Lute."

"You—you've got four aces," said Luther Buell, his hands halting and his eyes looking almost like those of a live fish.

"I have a royal straight flush in spades," said Ben Phelps, laying down his cards face up and beyond all question and doubt proving that his words had been correct.

Luther's eyes did not change but his hands began to tremble, and he said almost hoarsely for him:

"Where——? Those four aces—you ——"

But I cut Mr. Buell short by making it very evident that I was reaching for my iron and by saying:

"We are paid off in this game by what the cards say, Luther. Your cards say a king high straight flush in diamonds. Ben's cards say an ace high flush in spades. A legitimate royal flush according to Hoyle and the first I have seen in some time, Luther. Ben wins!"

SEEING that this hand naturally broke up the game, it was only a few minutes later that I managed to steer Ben to his room down to the hotel and get alone with him.

"Jack, what in the devil did Lute mean by insisting I had four aces and behaving so funny about it?" Ben asked me for the sixth or the eighth or maybe even the tenth time. "What happened, Jack?"

"You are surely taking the next boat and going back and marry that girl and indulge in no more poker, are you not?" I said, as he had told me this on the walk to the hotel.

"Absolutely, Jack. We'll be back as soon as I'm married and then watch the Phelps-Benson Company grow. Cliff and I have each tossed in our eighty thousand, practically. At least, I told Cliff I'd do this if I could take Lute, and take him I did," said Ben. "But what about those four aces Lute thought I had?"

"I will have to tell you, now that you assure me you will play no more poker, for two reasons. The first is that I want to strengthen your decision to play no more poker, and the second is that a little accounting out of your winnings, in all fairness to I and Ike and Saltpork, is due to us, Ben," I said somewhat serious.

"Shoot," said Ben.

"Luther Buell went to Skagway George and offered him ten thousand dollars to slip in a marked deck during the first game he played with you. Skagway came to me and told me about it. I told Skagway to take him up, but to bring those cards to me right away. They was cleverly marked—even artistically marked, I might say—on a regulation deck. Well, Ben, I got another regulation deck, just like it, and did some marking myself. I marked Luther's hand—his straight flush in diamonds—just like his own markings. I marked your hand—your royal flush in spades—so that it would look like as if you had four aces with a seven throwed in. That is why he thought you had four aces, Ben," I explained to him.

"But—but how in the devil did those two hands turn up just when they did?" asked Ben.

"Oh," I said, "after Ike dealt the first hand with the deck Luther had called for, and saw that his markings was all right, I switched decks. I switched when Skagway, as per instructions, spilt that drink of mellow rye down Luther's neck. I already had the deck stacked so the hands would come out just like they would. With Luther having a king high straight flush,

and being *sure* you had four aces, I knew he would go to any limit, and I knew that you would go to any limit when you saw that you had a royal straight flush, the highest hand in poker!"

"Then it was crooked," said Ben. "Then——"

"Hold on, Ben," I said. "Yes, it was crooked, in a way, but it was using methods that Luther has used against many innocent chechakos for many hundreds of thousands of dollars all his life, and remember that he had first put in the marked deck and thought he was playing with his own marked deck. Something had to be done to stop you from being a sucker for poker, Ben, and we did it. We all know you are a white man, and after you have deducted our expenses of losing to you and Luther——"

"It goes to charity," Ben cut in. "The balance goes to charity, Jack," said Ben.

"That is good news to I and Ike and Saltpork, Ben," I told him, and I do not deny that it was especially fine news to me. "We will use it as a start for a home for sourdoughs, let us say, which I know will be agreeable to you. Howsoever, Ben, we are strong in saying that we have made up our minds that you are also to extract the amount you have previously dropped to Luther in other years. Remember that you are going to get married, Ben. Give it to the bride as a sort of a wedding present, for instance."

Ben was silent for even a longer time than he had been when making that last big bet, and he was thinking again. Finally he bowed his head like as if he agreed with all I had said, and then he raised it and looked me in the eye and asked me:

"Jack, why have you been so damned decent to me?"

"Because, bub," I told him quietly, telling it to anyone for the first and only time since I have been in Alaska, "had things been a little different my own boy, now dead with his mother, would have been just about your age. You reminded me of him, bub—you reminded me of him an awful lot," I admitted.

YES, that is the true story of why I gave up the honest game of poker for the effete pastime of this contract bridge. A man has got to have some card game at which to while away the hours and indulge his desire for gambling, and of course you will understand that once I had desecrated that noble American game I could not go back and ever play it again. It would not be right, that is all.

But I have got to get this lie off my conscience about liking bridge, as I said, and now I have done it. Luther Buell was shot by a chechako last winter, and Ben is now quartered in New York for good. He is the president of the All Alaska Amalgamated Airways, and even if he hears about this now I do not think he will mind.

I know he will not mind, in fact. I have just had a letter from him and he says he will not call me friend any more unless I come down to New York by the next boat for the christening. He says that the first child, of course, had to be named after his wife's father and that the second had to be named after his own mother, because families are like that. But this newest one, he tells me, is to be called Mackenzie Jack Phelps and that it is the duty of a godfather to be present.

There is also one other great compensation in thinking of this trip I am about to take. Neither Ben nor his wife, I understand, play bridge, and I am seriously planning to take up such more intelligent games as tiddlywinks and hop-scotch and blind-man's-buff with Ben's two older children.

And maybe he will allow me to instruct Mackenzie Jack Phelps in the rudiments of poker. You cannot begin too early.

The Men Who Fought for Texas
A Hundred Years Ago

DEAD MEN SINGING

by

H. BEDFORD-JONES

THE MAN ALONE

I REACHED the old battlefield of San Jacinto about noon. The Texas sun was hot, a hot breeze swept up from the Gulf; just as on that day a hundred years ago when Sam Houston gave the word to charge. The scene fascinated me, not so much for what had happened here, but for what lay behind it. One man, who had prepared against what never came, and who suddenly seized the fleeting moment and grasped immortality. As I stared across the scene, a lilt of song came to me; it waved in the whispering of the grass and trees, it drifted down the hot sunlight. A man's rough, hoarse voice singing, as though to himself, in throaty exultation:

"We had to win or go under. We fought for a living Cause,
Not for a passel of statesmen working their slobbering jaws;
We planted with powder and bullet, we made a republic grow—
For by God, sir! We founded Texas a hundred years ago!"

I blinked around. Nothing in sight. No one was here. Yet a sudden thin burst of sound lifted, like the thin and distant voices of men in unison roaring forth a wild and hearty yell:

"Here's to you, Gin'ral Houston, damn your eyes!"

Sheer fancy, of course. And yet this ground had been stained deep with the blood of men; yonder river had run scarlet with death, a hundred years ago——

GONZALES, which had witnessed the first shot fired for Texas liberty, was now witnessing a very different scene. Sam Houston and his hastily gathered force, marching to the relief of the Alamo, had halted here. And here the news had reached them.

Consternation, grief, filled the town and camp. Scouts were hurriedly sent forth toward Bexar; a pall of mourning lay over the place. Scarcely a person had not lost friends or relatives in the Alamo. Houston sat with Colonel Sherman, the brave Kentuckian who had come to fight for Texas, and despondency mastered him.

A gaunt man, Houston, massive, powerful, blunt. His deep-set, patient eyes were pools of gray light, deepened by suffering both physical and mental. His gigantic frame wore no uniform, but shabby, baggy, dirty garments. They, like himself, were worn to shreds by what he had endured and spent in the cause of Texas.

"Travis and the rest—all dead!" he growled. "It may not be true. Those two Mexicans who brought the news may have been wrong. We'll hear from Deaf Smith or Karnes or other scouts pretty quick now."

"What'll you do then, Sam?" queried Sherman. He had borne from Kentucky the flag under which the army of Texas marched—a figure of Liberty on a white ground, heavy gold fringe surrounding it.

"God knows!" said Houston. "We've got four hundred men here. I've ordered Fannin to abandon Goliad and fall back to the Guadaloupe. That'll give us four hundred more and some cannon, if he can bring his artillery away. We've got to stop any panic breaking out, or we're done for."

"No panic," said Sherman coolly. "The die is cast now. The Convention has declared for Liberty. We're fighting for freedom, not to keep Texas in the Mexican union. And you're the commander in chief, Sam. They had to come to you at last!"

NO EXULTATION touched the grim bronzed mask of Houston. At last, yes!

All these weary months he had ridden up and down the settlements, preaching liberty, orating, raising men and money.

He had been appointed general before, and the politicians gathered at San Felipe had deposed him. They had been fighting among themselves for months in bitter rancor. Mainly, they had been fighting him. They feared his blunt tongue, his vision, his honesty. He was the most powerful man in all Texas, and well they knew it, so the story spread that he wanted to become dictator. He, who had not a dollar nor a home to his name!

Bitterness deepened in his eyes. Two days more, and he would have been in Bexar—but now the Alamo had fallen.

He had four hundred men in his army. How many had come out of Mexico with Santa Anna, no one knew as yet. His army was a pack of volunteers, without discipline. He could give no orders, but only requests. He could punish none. They laughed at any idea of training or order. But they were not laughing tonight, nor was he.

"Sherman, tell me the truth." He lifted the deep gray eyes in a tragic look. "How far can I count on the boys? What do they say about me? I know all that's said of me in San Felipe and so on—but what about the army?"

"They're for you, Sam," said the Kentuckian simply. "They want to fight, and you're the man to lead 'em. All they ask is to meet the Mexicans face to face."

"Yes." The tragic look deepened. Houston's heart sank. "Meet cannon, lancers, trained regiments face to face—with what? Do you know how much artillery, powder and supplies the army has?"

"No," said Sherman in surprise. "Artillery's coming from New Orleans, of course, and I understand there's no lack of transport."

"No lack," said Houston, with a grim smile. "Right now we haven't a cannon. The transport consists of two yoke of oxen, two wagons, and a dozen horses. The equipment of the men is about as good, except for your company of Kentuckians. Chew on that for a spell, and gimme a drink."

Sherman passed over the jug, and Houston lifted it. Suddenly he set it down and leaped to his feet. Shouts were rising through the town and camp. A galloping horse came to a halt outside. Into the headquarters tent burst the scout Karnes, waving a paper. Colonel Austin and other officers followed him in.

"We met up with Mrs. Dickinson twenty mile out," panted Karnes. "Her and a couple negroes—all that's alive out'n the Alamo. Cap'n Dickinson and the kid were killed. Deef Smith stayed to fetch her along in. I come with the news, and this. She got it from General Sesma as she was leaving Bexar——"

HOUSTON seized the paper—a boasting proclamation signed by Santa Anna and ordering death and no quarter to all rebels.

"Well, Karnes? What news?"

"It's all true," groaned the scout. "Every last one dead. Nobody surrendered. And Santy Anny's got thousands and thousands of men, she says. He didn't even bury the bodies, but burned 'em. And he's got another army as big under Gin'ral Urrea who's grabbed Fannin and Goliad by this time. He's a-sweeping all Texas, and she heard some talk that he's a-going right on into the States as well."

So the news of the Alamo was poured forth, while Houston stood with shaggy brows knit and resolve hardening within him. A few hundred men should have gathered at San Felipe by this time, with provisions, powder and stores. He beckoned his aid, Colonel Austin, aside.

"Ride like hell for San Felipe, Bill. I got to stick right here and—what's that, Karnes? What was that last?"

"She says Santy Anny's coming right on, may be here any time," said Karnes. "He aims to burn every house and kill every settler that ain't Mexican by birth. And he's on the way."

"Well, shut your damned mouth about it," snapped Houston, but it was too late now. With an oath, he turned back

to Austin. "You see? Now I got to bring off all these here settlers and fight off the Mexicans, if they're coming. Get to San Felipe. Raise every man you can, get powder and transport and cannon somehow! Drill those men if you get a chance. For God's sake check any panic, Bill!"

Austin nodded and departed.

Later, Mrs. Dickinson and the two negroes were brought in. Deaf Smith, the famous scout, came straight to Houston with one of the negroes, who had been the slave of Travis. Houston learned the details, then asked after Mrs. Dickinson.

"Some o' them women are takin' care of her," said Smith. "She's goin' to have a baby pretty soon and she's downright hysterical. She'll raise hell, lemme tell you, Sam."

And she did, poor soul. True, General Sesma was coming with a mere seven hundred dragoons; but Mrs. Dickinson's nerve-shattered fears magnified this into thousands. Neither Houston nor anyone else had definite information on the numbers of Santa Anna's army. It was certainly composed of two or three columns aiming to sweep all Texas, and it was most assuredly some thousands strong, with artillery, lancers and dragoons.

PANIC seized upon Gonzales and upon the army here. The one thought was of flight, and Houston could barely impose some semblance of order on that flight. His own men were deserting hourly, rushing away to get their families and friends out of the tornado's path. These deserters, galloping from town to town, spread wild stories, which grew more wild as they were handed on. Throughout eastern Texas the panic became universal. Every man's intent was now to get his own family to safety, regardless. Every community had but the one thought—to protect its own women and children. Consequently, all thought of joining the army was abandoned. Let others do that! And none did.

Gonzales was abandoned and burned. Slowly, Houston retreated, gathering in all the settlers as he went, protecting the flood of refugees that poured across the wide plains. He sent out frantically for reinforcements and aid. The men from San Felipe joined him and raised his force to six hundred in all. Two cannon were promised, but came not.

So at last he came to the Colorado River of Texas, crossed it, and halted. Various skirmishes had temporarily checked the Mexicans, who were now awaiting their main columns. They were across the river, almost within sight. And here began Sam Houston's weeks of agony, as he devoted himself to drilling his men and keeping them in hand, hoping against hope that Fannin might yet join him.

The few hundred men under his command were the whole hope of Texas. What these men wanted was to fight—and do it now.

Harsh, uncompromising, blunt as ever, he refused flatly to jeopardize Texas until he got artillery, powder, men and food. Rations were scant. Daily Houston looked for word of relief, but his emissaries returned empty-handed. And Santa Anna was advancing, with artillery.

Houston's men jeered at him to his face, hotly telling him that rifles alone would send the Mexicans flying. They begged with him, pleaded with him, swore at him; he remained adamant. President Burnet and the new government, at San Felipe, were moving heaven and earth to raise men and money and guns. Food was coming; let the army wait until it came, with the cannon.

No use. They wore him down, actual mutiny threatened, his authority evaporated. Six hundred men could whip all Mexico! Sherman told him frankly that the men could no longer be controlled, and for his own sake he must yield. So, bitter-hearted, he yielded. It was arranged that on the following morning, the army should cross the river and attack the Mexican camp hand to hand. Details were set forth —and then, suddenly, a scout came in with news.

Johnson's force had been destroyed. Ward had capitulated. Fannin's entire force was captured and massacred—the first definite news of this. And columns of the enemy were pouring forward in overwhelming numbers.

The army was stunned, paralyzed. All thought of attack was given over. Vainly did Houston pronounce the news false—men knew better. The delusion that Texians could not be defeated was gone. Suddenly all the army realized its own weakness.

Next day came further news, and the darkness began indeed to clamp down on Sam Houston. The cabinet, the whole Texan government, was in flight. San Felipe was being abandoned; New Washington, named as the capital, was being abandoned. East to Harrisburg for the government of republican Texas! Harrisburg and safety!

Sam Houston swore heartily and sat him down to write his steadfast friend Rusk, the secretary of war:

"You know I am not easily depressed, but before God I swear that since we parted I have found the darkest hours of my life. For two days and nights I have not eaten an ounce of anything, or slept for a moment . . ."

RETREAT now, retreat once more. Another flood of frightened settlers to be moved back eastward. Back to San Felipe on the Brazos River—a nightmare march with pitiless cold and rain, with the Mexican dragoons pressing close behind, and a flooded river ahead to cross. It was crossed at last and the bridge destroyed. Another respite now, a chance to hope and breathe.

Vituperation poured upon Houston from every side. What! Run away from these Mexicans? Let them burn and slay on every side without hindrance? Sam Houston was only a lawyer after all. He knew nothing about fighting. He was ruining Texas.

The army murmured. Houston was drilling them day and night, preparing them to meet artillery, cavalry, trained infantry; teaching them to obey orders. Who was he to give them orders anyhow? By God, they were just as good as Sam Houston any day! And they'd prove it. They'd elect another general. Why, he didn't even consult with them or with the officers about what to do! True enough.

"I hold no councils of war," Houston wrote the government. "If I err, the blame is mine."

He drilled them himself, and they hated him for it; but they dared not defy him to his face. The power was there, in those deep gray eyes; the spirit was there, the courage of endurance, the domination that comes from suffering and patience. The one man on whom he could rely utterly was Deaf Smith, the scout, who came and went. Santa Anna was at San Felipe now. If he crossed the Brazos, all was lost. Captain Baker with a handful of men was holding the ford there against him.

One night, without warning, Deaf Smith showed up.

"Fighting," he reported curtly. "Baker's held the ford two days and repulsed Santy Anny, Gin-ral."

"Thank God," breathed Houston. "Sure of it, Deef?"

"Yeah, but that ain't all, Sam. He's got acrost at Thompson's Ferry and is heading for Harrisburg with the hull damned army after him."

"What!" Houston leaped up. "For Harrisburg? But——"

"Ain't no buts, Sam. The president and the cabinet's done skipped out for Galveston. I met up with Rusk, the sec'etery of war, down the road; he's headin' to join up with you. Got a few fellers with him."

Houston sank down on his camp stool, and swallowed hard. "I suppose you don't know anything about how many men Santa Anna has? Or if he's heading down the Brazos—why, he'd have to do that, to reach Harrisburg!"

"He sure is. Got about a thousand men

with him. The rest of his army is in two other columns. Sam, one north, one south —hey! What's up?"

For, with one bound, Houston was out of his seat, a flame in his gray eyes.

"Are you sure? Sure? Careful now, Deef! Sure of those numbers?"

"Yeah. We done caught a feller from his column."

"Thank God; oh, thank God!" cried Houston, and grabbed his hat. "Go get some sleep, Deef. We're marching in the morning. See you later."

NO SLEEP for Sam Houston this night. When Rusk showed up, Houston grappled him in a bearlike embrace. A courier came dashing in, as the army was turning out hastily, with a letter from the acting secretary, who had taken the place of Rusk. A letter of bitter vituperation, demanding action from Houston; a frightened, panicky letter. And the government had fled to Galveston! Houston grinned and tucked the script away.

"We're marching in the morning, boys. Get ready," boomed out Houston's voice as the torches flung red radiance on his bronzed features, no longer weary. "Five hundred and twenty-five men, huh? That's enough, I reckon. You'll get your bellies full o' fight this trip, boys! Dismissed."

Yells of glee, sudden vociferous shouts for Sam Houston. New shouts rang forth, new yells pealed up. Into camp past the sentries slogged a wagon, then another. Two six-pounders, sent by friends of Texas from Cincinnati—here in the nick of time! The packing cases still unopened.

Houston detailed artillery men to get the guns assembled, saw to every detail of preparation himself, came back to headquarters dead tired. There he found Deaf Smith.

"I got me enough sleep, Sam," said the scout. "Let's get busy. Need me?"

"We sure do, Deef. Take all the scouts you can find, and trail Santa Anna's column. If he's heading for Harrisburg, he's bound to cross the river at the Lynchburg ferry. I'll get there first—and if I do, we've got him where we want him! Have word for me sure. We'll set out at daylight, and by next morning ought to be there."

"Got you. Good luck, Sam," and Deaf Smith was gone.

Dead tired as he was, Sam Houston sat gazing into the flame of his candle for a long while before turning in. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he saw the one thing he had prayed heaven to grant him coming true—a chance to smash at the head and center of the whole Mexican army. A thousand men; no more than two to his one. And two cannon had come. It was his hour, his hour, and the hour of Texas!

No haphazard. No mere chance. He saw the thing clearly. From this moment he planned the event. Nothing should spoil his stroke now; whatever happened, he must go through with it as he saw it.

That resolve was to be tested sorely.

Santa Anna would reach Harrisburg, yes; but coming back, he must cross by Lynch's Ferry. Santa Anna, with a thousand men, away from the main body of his army which was sweeping over the whole country! Sam Houston went to bed with ringing thoughts.

Daybreak found him up and off—the last march.

SANTA ANNA not only reached Harrisburg, but burned it. He tried to catch the Texas government, and was within five minutes of bagging the whole crowd from the president down. He took New Washington unhindered, then turned from Galveston Bay and headed through the oaks and brush for Lynch's Ferry. He had no suspicion that Sam Houston was ahead of him.

Ahead of him, yes; and Deaf Smith was on the job. After that long and weary march, the Texas army was worn out. The Mexican vanguard came up. Houston steadily declined battle, ordered his men to eat and sleep. The Cincinnati cannon, the

"Twin Sisters," were in battery. The camp was fortified.

Santa Anna described the little camp, with its gaily waving flag bearing the figure of Liberty, and laughed. Grimly calm as any Indian, Sam Houston watched the Mexican forces encamp. He had chosen the position to suit himself, and he meant to choose the time to suit himself also—that was part of his plan. He did not intend to throw his men into battle directly after a march.

When the Mexican cannon opened, however, and their skirmishers, that afternoon, crept forward under cover, he had them cleared out in short order. The "Twin Sisters" opened fire, his horsemen charged, and the skirmish was over. Late that night, Deaf Smith came into Houston's tent and wakened him.

"Hey, Sam! I didn't want to blurt it out afore anybody, but there's a hell of a lot o' Mexicans on the way. They ain't far, neither. Gin'ral Cos and his dragoons."

Houston caught his breath, then assented calmly.

"Thanks, Deef. You stick around; be here at daylight sure. I got work for you."

No more sleep that night. General Cos and more dragoons! How many? Hard to say. Yet the plan must hold at all costs. Regardless of odds. So Santa Anna did not attack because he was waiting for Cos, eh? Sly fellow, that El Presidente!

Daylight. Houston took Deaf Smith into his tent and showed him a number of axes.

"Deef, pick your own men and get to work. Suppose anything happened so's those Mexicans wanted to get away from here in a hurry. How'd they get over the San Jacinto?"

"They might swim," said Deaf Smith, with a grin. "Or they might cross by Vince's bridge, down the stream a ways. That's how they got here."

"You go cut away Vince's bridge, then," said Houston. "And get back here in a hurry if you want to see the fun."

No mean job, this; several miles of woods to cross, and a bridge to cut, while the Mexicans were all about. Deaf Smith set forth with his party, but on learning their objective they balked flatly. Moses Lapham alone went on with him, and Vince's bridge was destroyed—not before General Cos and five hundred men rode over it, however.

MORNING passed. Toward noon, Cos and the dragoons were espied, riding in to swell the force of Santa Anna. Houston roared as his men pointed them out, roared with laughter.

"Why, you fools, Santa Anna's marching some of his men out, around a swell of the prairie, and back in sight of us—to make us think he's getting reinforcements."

None the less, uneasiness reigned through the camp. Houston had his scouts out, obtained precise and rapid reports, knew exactly what he was doing. Halfway between the two camps was a large grove of timber—and upon this point, Sam Houston was preparing his whole stroke.

Noon came. By this time, the certain news that General Cos had arrived could no longer be disguised. What with one party and another coming in, Houston now had seven hundred men. He knew very well that Santa Anna had twice his number. And now, almost at the last moment, a new disaster threatened his whole plan.

His officers, backed by their men, demanded that he hold a council of war.

"All right, boys," and Houston chuckled. "Come right ahead and we'll hold it. But remember one thing! I'm giving the orders here, and by God, I'll shoot the first man who doesn't obey them—no matter who he is. Come along, all hands!"

The senior officers gathered. Faint heart was ruling again; the army was strongly posted, came the argument, and Santa Anna should be made to attack. That way, the great disparity in numbers would be discounted. Sam Houston said nothing at all, but listened in grim silence.

Two officers were for attack. The rest voted them down.

"All right, boys; much obliged," said Houston. "I ain't ready to give any orders yet, so I vote we all have a drink around."

No word yet from Deaf Smith. The afternoon wore on. Three o'clock came and passed. The scouts reported that the Mexican cavalry horses were being watered, that all the army, and the dragoons who had arrived that morning, were taking the usual siesta. Then Deaf Smith slipped into camp. He nodded to Houston. The latter swung around to his officers.

"All right, boys. Let's lick Santa Anna before he gets his boots on. Sherman! Burleson! Millard!"

He gave the orders rapidly. One startled gasp, and they obeyed. The men obeyed. The cavalry under Millard mounted and rode forth, sweeping around openly to the attack of the Mexican left. Meantime, the Texians were massing forward, covered by the heavy timber from sight of the Mexican sentinels.

They burst forth. The Twin Sisters vomited grape into the camp ahead. Houston was with the charge. His voice rang out and led the rippling yell.

"Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

In wild, hasty alarm, the Mexicans attempted some formation. A ragged fire was opened. Not until the charging Texians were close, did their rifles answer the musketry—then death hailed into the ranks ahead. The dragoons broke and fled. The Mexican muskets were still stacked, to a large extent; the surprise of the moment was complete.

Houston's horse was shot under him. He mounted another, followed his yelling line of men over the breastworks and into the Mexican camp. Here a desperate defense was attempted, but it was crushed almost at once. A sudden agonizing pain, and Houston felt himself going down—ankle smashed and horse killed with the same ball.

Someone lent him a hand. He sat down and surveyed the frightful, incredible scene before him.

IT WAS no longer a battle, but a massacre. The Mexican cavalry had attempted to cross the bayou directly behind the camp, only to find it a hopeless morass; men and horses lay strewn everywhere, forming a causeway over which the Texians advanced in further pursuit. No rifles now. Bayonets and bowie knives alone were doing the work. A horrible wailing sound, the sound of men screaming in death, rose over the field. The Mexican infantry were in panic-stricken flight.

The Texians caught dragoon horses and went in pursuit. Such of the Mexican lancers as could, headed the wild flight for Vince's bridge. The pursuing avengers were close behind them—and there was no bridge. A few swam their horses across the stream, but more died there.

Far and wide, by bayou and prairie and oak-grove, the slaughter spread. No orders could check it; Texas had it coming. It was April 21st. Six weeks before, the Alamo had fallen. A month before, the Goliad butchery had taken place. Here were the men who had done those things, some of them, and the army went mad.

Sam Houston was carried back to his own camp. His wound was excessively painful, but exultation conquered pain. As the afternoon hours passed, his orders began to take effect. The lust of killing passed away, and prisoners dribbled in. By evening, six hundred were gathered together and guards posted.

Jubilation reigned supreme. Discipline was lost; the impossible had been accomplished, and now was the time to celebrate. From Santa Anna's private supplies came wine, champagne, delicacies of all kinds. His private effects were looted. His treasure chest was brought in, with ten thousand dollars in coin, and Sam Houston grinned, when they asked him what to do with it.

"Well, boys, I reckon you-all have earned it! And you ain't had no pay, so——"

Wild whoops went up. Food, liquor, victory! Mexican powder lighted the woods in boyish explosions. Songs were chorused up to the stars. With midnight, order was coming back, and things were got in hand.

MORNING found Sam Houston, at least, clear-headed. Despatches to write, couriers to get off, a million and one arrangements to make, plunder to be gathered—everything to be done, and his ankle smashed. Detachments were sent out to bring in all the prisoners possible. No sign of Santa Anna anywhere among the dead, nor among the captives. Part of the army went off to hunt, for deer were plentiful hereabouts.

The day passed. Toward dusk, two men came riding in with a shabby little fellow they had picked up down the bayou, scared to death and shedding tears. They started to turn him in among the prisoners, and a murmur arose.

"El Presidente! El Presidente!"

Better look into this, said somebody. Might be Santa Anna, even if he does deny it. Take him to the gin'ral.

Sam Houston, snatching brief reprieve from the consuming pain of his smashed ankle, was asleep. When they woke him and told him that Santa Anna had been brought in—well, there is more than one story to that. Whether rough old Sam uttered the famous "mot" of General Cambronne at Waterloo, or whether he made the polite and polished bit of oratory that later history puts into his mouth, may be conjectured.

At all events, when he found that he really had the top prize in his hand, he was wide awake enough. For he, and no one else, realized what this prize could and would mean to Texas—and the utter mad folly that would lie in executing the murderer of Alamo and Goliad.

He sat late into the night, aflame with his vision. He still had seven hundred men, or a few less; and there were still Mexican generals galore, with thousands of picked men and artillery to north and south. There was one man those Mexicans would obey, and one only—the dictator, the President of all Mexico.

"Sit down and write," he muttered. "Sit down and write, *El Presidente.* Send the message to your generals. Tell them to evacuate Texas, and do it now. The alternative will not be pleasant matter for you to face, after Goliad——"

A greater victory there than any battle, if he could pull it off. This one little opium-sodden bit of flesh, whom he could strike out of existence with one hand—and with joy—could mean more to Texas in his abject cowardice than ten thousand men. So Sam Houston sat and dreamed into the night hours.

And his dreams came true.

For your Library List!

MURDER
AT THE
OLD STONE HOUSE
by
Charlotte Murray Russell

THIS Book introduces to the reader Jane Edwards, a sharp-tongued spinster of forty-odd, a bit of a snooper, but with it all a very lovable person.

The mysterious murder of Sophia Stone, matriarch and martinet, on her seventieth birthday, brought from their various closets the many skeletons which the numerous members of the Stone clan had collected over four generations. It was a baffling murder, and the police became further confounded when Sophia's younger sister was found strangled to death.

Finally, in exasperation, the acid-tongued Jane took things into her own hands. She clarified the mystery of the teapot, the candle and the book, and untangled the puzzle of the black silk cord of the *pince-nez*. And when, in a crowded room the murderer made his *one* mistake, Jane was the only one alert enough to see it—and the case was solved.

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